

FOR MY YOKE IS EASY AND MY BURDEN, LIGHT: REDEEMING THE LANGUAGE  
OF SUBMISSION FOR WOMEN SURVIVORS OF ABUSE IN  
A NEW ENGLAND CONGREGATION

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To my husband, Peter, and daughter, Jenna...

Thank you for your patience, love and support in this process.

To the mentors in the different facets of my life...

Thank you for your belief in me and your support along the way.

To the women in the Discovering God, Discovering Yourself group...

I cannot express enough my thanks and gratitude for all of you—it has been a joy to  
discover along with you!

To Rev. Dr. Dee Johnson Swilling...

Thank you allowing the group to take place in your church, for your encouragement and  
sense of humor in the midst of it all.

To the One to Whom All Things Belong...

May this serve your intentions for your people.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis-project addresses the spiritually formative attitude of submission and its relevance to Christian faith. It sought to answer the question, "Do women who have been abused have a different view of submission than women who have not had that experience?" The six-week group, "Discovering God, Discovering Yourself," was an interactive spiritual formation group held at First Baptist Church, in Exeter, NH. In it, women who self-identified as having been in an abusive relationship and those who identified as not having been in an abusive relationship came together to explore concepts related to their identity as women, as well as God's identity to them. The format for the program was based, in part, on David Benner's book, *Surrender to Love*.

Submission, as a discipline, is considered primarily from the focus of what that means in a life where Christ's lordship is held central. Applications for the Christian Church in regard to this area are also considered.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Submission is an important, but sometimes difficult, concept for Christians. Submission is an attitude that is directly opposite from the human desire to keep up, to store, to hold on to things. Submission, instead, asks the believer to hold loosely to things, to come before God, as Henri Nouwen stated so eloquently, "...with all that I am and all that I have. I cannot return to God with just half of my being...God wants not just a part of me, but all of me. Only when I surrender myself completely to God's parental love can I expect to be free from endless distractions, ready to hear the voice of love, and able to recognize my own unique call."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, submission in relation to a believer's relationship with God bears in mind that God is the one to whom all things belong, including one's very own soul. It is giving of oneself wholly to God because of the perfection of love that exists within that relationship.

This "perfection of love" is to be extended to interpersonal relationships, as well. Relationships should exist as places where the other is put first, and where the relationship is motivated by faith, hope and love. Interpersonal relationships should mirror the relationships that believers have with God. Submission is a concrete display of the meaning of love. Love is the only thing that truly redeems the language of submission.

Submission, then, has as its very center the notion of "letting go." Because of submission's focus of "letting go" of personal needs and desires, it could be said that the term is rooted in a life of simplicity, and in a desire for wholeness that is not based in peripheral things but in the central focus of one's belief in God. This "vision for

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<sup>1</sup> Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Eternal Seasons, A Spiritual Journey through the Church's Year*, ed. Michael Ford (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2004), 74.

wholeness and peace, which shines like a beacon of light through the Old Covenant, gives us important insights into Christian simplicity. This theme is wonderfully gathered up in the Hebrew word *shalom*, a full-bodied concept that resonates with wholeness, unity, balance. Gathering in peace, it means a harmonious, caring community with God at its center as the prime sustainer and most glorious inhabitant.”<sup>2</sup>

This desire for God as “center” is something that happens internally. Dallas Willard in his book *Renovations of the Heart* states that “spiritual formation for the Christian basically refers to the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself.”<sup>3</sup> This is not something that happens through a keeping of “rules” or looking like Christ by some external measurement. It is not something that comes about by living up to external expectations of people in a believer’s world. It comes about through the internal trust in a relationship with a God that the believer senses has the desire for her ultimate transformation into the image of Christ. It requires placing aside one’s own desires at times in order to engage with the better desires of the internally dwelling Spirit.

Submission, as a means toward simplicity of life, is an important spiritual discipline. It is reflected in keeping of Sabbath, in the discipline of fasting, in baptism, in the acknowledgement that one is a sinner and in the ongoing relationship that a believer has with God. It is part of the willingness to set aside personal agendas in order to listen to the “still, small voice of God.” Submission is an integral part of the faith of Christians; in fact, it could be said that one cannot be a Christian without being submissive to God.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 30.

<sup>3</sup> Dallas Willard, *Renovations of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 22.

<sup>4</sup> Favorite Psalms such as Psalm 23 show a basic attitude of submission—the believer trusts and allows God to provide even in the midst of difficult circumstances.

Submission is also a core element in interpersonal relationships. This is part of the phrase that is often called the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."<sup>5</sup>

Thus, submission is an attitude of trust. It is an attitude that God, who can be trusted with a person's soul, can also be trusted with the very bone and marrow of daily living. It is trusting that God is not there to rigorously and abusively "discipline" a person. It is believing that God's word speaks of a God who desires a relationship with humans and who, wishing to mold a person into the one that she is designed to be, can be trusted with all things, even those things that may have been painful in the past but for whom non-relinquishment can cause greater emotional pain. Submission is a necessary concept. Submission, though, is not a word to be cast about recklessly in the interaction between spirit, God and memories of abuse.<sup>6</sup>

The challenge for many abused Christian women is that language related to submission can be difficult to incorporate into a life of faith. Part of that reason is related to the fact that the term submission has primarily been used in reductionist Christianity<sup>7</sup> to describe interpersonal relationships in home and in church. According to the interpretations of some leaders of reductionist groups, women are to submit to men both

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 6:31.

<sup>6</sup> Abuse is sometimes hard to define because it happens in many different dimensions. A working definition of abuse may be "treatment of another person that considers no regard for the physical, emotional or spiritual well-being of that person and which causes significant physical, emotional or spiritual harm." Such relationships often have at their core an overarching need for control of the person who is being abused. This often translates to significant difficulty in leaving the relationship for fear of retribution.

<sup>7</sup> Reductionism may be seen as the desire to have all present-day relationships (with God and with others) based on the expectations that were extended to the cultural to which the text was originally written.



in home, church and even, according to some, in interactions in other social arenas.<sup>8</sup>

Teaching around submission is also often focused around patriarchal language for God.

This increases the difficulty for women who may have been abused by fathers.

Given the prevalence of abuse within domestic relationships, abused people are present in any church gathering. And while many find church to be a safe place, for others language that is part of the process of worship and at the base of church relationships may be particularly difficult or even re-traumatizing. Patriarchal language and themes of submission are particularly difficult. It is important that this language be “redeemed” for those who struggle with memories or present instances of abuse. This will enable these wounded individuals to begin to have a well-focused view of the God who expresses love for the “least of these.”<sup>9</sup>

### **Submission in Scripture & Cultural Challenges**

For most Protestant Christians, the Bible is the main document by which life is ordered. Within the pages of the book are concepts related to God, God's interactions with humans, and human interactions with each other. For these believers, all that is contained in this book is informed by God's Spirit. However, for some of these same individuals, many of the cultural dictates identified within the Bible are difficult to apply to modern cultural needs. For example, almost no North American Christians would today follow-through on or even think appropriate the admonishment of Leviticus to put to

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<sup>8</sup> Some indicate that women ought not to take positions of authority in a workplace, for example, indicating that such positions undermine God's order for humanity. See page 7 of this chapter for further discussion related to submission in a woman's workplace.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 25:40.

death the child who curses his mother or father<sup>10</sup> or to kill both the man and the woman who have committed adultery.<sup>11</sup>

The Bible is a fluid text, and the spirit of its contents is not encapsulated by any single culture; in fact, it is unique to other sacred texts in its ability to remain relevant to cultures that are very different than the original culture to which it was written. It is able to do so primarily because “the Bible’s witness of God’s pursuit of human beings is a story of relationship, and therefore it is messy. It is not ordered by straight lines of logic, but meanders with the erratic circumstances of particular human beings who respond in differing ways to the call of God upon their lives.”<sup>12</sup>

#### Revisionist and Reductionist Views

Many of the Bible’s rules around specific behavior (sometimes known as “holiness codes”) have to do primarily with a call toward fairness and love: at the core of these codes exists the desire for people to interact in appropriate ways with each other. Unlike the norms that may have existed in other cultures around them, the Hebrew who was physically (or even financially) strong could not take from the weak simply because he could. There were rules about what was right and what was wrong and at the very center of them was the reality that a person’s strength or position ought not to run rampant over the right (or, sometimes, plight) of another. These rules imply an attitude of submissiveness—the ability to defer one’s wishes in a relationship out of respect for the

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<sup>10</sup> Leviticus 20:9.

<sup>11</sup> Leviticus 20:10.

<sup>12</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Life with God: Reading the Bible for Spiritual Transformation* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 83.

other person.<sup>13</sup> While the “spirit” of the holiness codes that are rooted in submission carries forward in such a perspective on the texts, the specifics of many of these codes—such as codes related to killing a person who does not obey these rules—do not appropriately carry forward into modern culture.

Some revisionist groups<sup>14</sup> have been concerned with submission, its connectedness to what is deemed “holiness codes” and the mistreatment that they see that some have experienced by thoughts related to submission. In order to deal with the challenges related to that, the concept has often been removed from some Christian education programs and worship services. There has been a desire to see egalitarianism<sup>15</sup> in relationships as the norm within Christian interactions. Underneath this is the belief that people in society deemed as less powerful than others are often at the receiving end of abuse. These churches often perceive that language usage is frequently the carrier of these concepts into society.

For example, within the introduction to *The New Century Hymnal* is recorded that the purpose of the revision of “metaphors and pronouns that refer to God, Christ and Spirit”<sup>16</sup> is that “for nearly two millennia these words have tended toward exclusively

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<sup>13</sup> The adage “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” is related to this—one could not “take” more than what was justified. For example, if someone put out someone’s eye, the other could not kill the perpetrator of the act.

<sup>14</sup> Revisionist groups might be seen as those who wish to apply the concepts inherent to the holiness codes, but not necessarily to apply the specifics of each law to present culture. As such, the “spirit” of Paul’s assertions related to submission carries through to present day culture. The culturally specific norms (i.e. women covering their heads for worship) do not necessarily apply to present-day culture. In fact, for revisionist groups, it could be harmful to allow antiquated cultural norms to apply to present-day culture.

<sup>15</sup> Egalitarianism can be seen as men and women being equal due to being created in God’s image, being endowed with gifts and abilities to use both inside and outside the church which are not gender-specific. See [www.cbeinternational.org](http://www.cbeinternational.org) Egalitarian is not a biblical term.

<sup>16</sup> *The New Century Hymnal* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1995), vii.

masculine characterization, bearing painful consequences, especially for women.”<sup>17</sup> The revision resulted in examining language across all spectra of society, and removing language that would deem it necessary for females (or others in areas of lower societal power) to assume any position of submission to males. Also “militant language,” or language related to “lordship” has been modified in an attempt to remove mistreatment for marginalized individuals in society.<sup>18</sup>

Others are not so concerned about the inappropriateness of the term “lordship;” instead they are concerned with the actual status of Christians in communities of faith, especially as that status pertains to gender issues. Revisionist Evangelical groups such as Christians for Biblical Equality base their ministry upon promoting egalitarianism in both church and home by stating that “all believers—without regard to gender, ethnicity, or class—must exercise their God-given gifts with equal authority and equal responsibility in church, home and world.”<sup>19</sup>

This is important, especially due to the fact that there are some passages in the Bible that specifically deal with issues of submission. For example, references in the epistles, in particular, see submissiveness as a primary focus, especially as that pertains to submissiveness of wives to their husbands; this is seen as an apparently godly expression of proper Christian households. For example, Ephesians 5:22-24,<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *The New Century Hymnal*, vii.

<sup>18</sup> *The New Century Hymnal*, vii.

<sup>19</sup> Christians for Biblical Equality, “Our Mission and History,” [http://www.cbeinternational.org\\_](http://www.cbeinternational.org_) (accessed, July 1, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Ephesians 5:22-24 (ESV) “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.”

Titus 2:3-5<sup>21</sup> and 1 Peter 3:1-2<sup>22</sup> discuss submission as a necessary element within the marital relationship. These texts are at the center of concern about application for Christian groups, especially among those who would consider such scripture as normative for human interpersonal relationships. In some reductionist groups<sup>23</sup> the concept of submission has center stage, especially in relation to interpersonal and marital relationships.

The Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, which is an outgrowth of some of these reductionist-minded Christians, sees that diverging from what they deem as normative "complementarian"<sup>24</sup> roles in marital relationships leads to "widespread uncertainty and confusion in our culture regarding the complementary differences between masculinity and femininity,"<sup>25</sup> and "the upsurge of physical and emotional abuse in the family."<sup>26</sup> The group sees its purpose as "[studying] and [setting] forth the biblical

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<sup>21</sup> Titus 2:3-5 (ESV) "Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husband, that the word of God may not be reviled."

<sup>22</sup> 1 Peter 3:1-2 (NLT) "In the same way, you wives must accept the authority of your husbands, even those who refuse to accept the Good News. Your godly lives will speak to them better than any words. They will be won over by watching your pure, godly behavior."

<sup>23</sup> Reductionist groups may be inclined to view many of the holiness codes as still appropriate to modern culture. As such, reductionism might be defined as having a sense of the necessity to apply all concepts to present-day cultures in the same manner that they were applied to ancient cultures. Contextualization of concepts is seen to veer from the truths extended by God to humankind.

<sup>24</sup> One definition of "complementarian" (which is not a scriptural term) is that men, by nature of their manhood are given certain roles in church, families and society, while women have other "complementary" positions. Both are equal heirs of the Image of God, but males have the authority to lead while women the responsibility to submit to that leadership.

<sup>25</sup> The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, "The Danvers Statement" in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006) , page 469.

<sup>26</sup> The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, "The Danvers Statement," 469.

view of the relationship between men and women, especially in the home and in the church."<sup>27</sup> Such roles must, according to this group's view, be rooted in mature masculinity and femininity.

Mature masculinity, as defined by this group, is indicated by a man's "sense of benevolent responsibility to lead, provide for and protect women in ways appropriate to a man's differing relationships,"<sup>28</sup> leading toward the acknowledgement that "if necessary in some disagreement, the husband will accept the burden of making the final choice."<sup>29</sup> This reflects the group's assertion that mature femininity is embodied in an attitude of "a freeing disposition to affirm, receive and nurture strength and leadership from worthy men in ways appropriate to a woman's differing relationships."<sup>30</sup>

Even if such reductionist views are correct, such language must not lead toward the potential for abuse within relationships. In such relationships, the wife ought not to reside within a relationship where "the burden of the final choice" results in any abuse toward her. Such things will be discussed further within the course of this work.

### Creation and Leadership

As regards an apparent scriptural desire for male leadership, some have argued that the creation account of humankind itself supports this ordering of relationships and that it clearly shows God's intention toward a permanent arrangement of female submission to males. Proper ordering of male and female relationships, according to this focus, is necessary for a Christian lifestyle. For example,

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<sup>27</sup> The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, "The Danvers Statement," 470.

<sup>28</sup> John Piper, "A Vision of Biblical Complementarity: Manhood and Womanhood Defined According to the Bible," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL:Crossway Books), 39.

<sup>29</sup> John Piper, "A Vision of Biblical Complementarity," 40.

<sup>30</sup> John Piper, "A Vision of Biblical Complementarity," 46.

While I am not keen on hierarchy and patriarchy as terms describing the man-woman relationship in scripture, Genesis 2:18-23...and Ephesians 5:21-33...continue to convince me that the man-woman relationship is intrinsically nonreversible. By this I mean that, other things being equal, a situation in which a female boss has a male secretary, or a marriage in which the woman (as we say) wears the trousers, will put more strain on the humanity of both parties than if it were the other way around. This is part of the reality of the creation, a given fact that nothing can change.<sup>31</sup>

At least one person has indicated that a closer look at Genesis 1:26 shows that God named the human race "man" and by doing so ordains female submission to males. This is because "God's naming of the race 'man' whispers male headship."<sup>32</sup> This scholar goes on to state, "God did *not* name the race 'woman.' If 'woman' had been the more appropriate and illuminating designation, no doubt God would have used it. He does not even devise a neutral term like 'persons.' He called us 'man,' which anticipates the male headship brought out clearly in chapter two...male leadership may be personally repugnant to feminists, but it does have the virtue of explaining the sacred text."<sup>33</sup>

While this explanation may seem to have merit, it cannot fully explain the sacred text. It cannot do so because it will not do to base one's theology upon a challenge of the English language, as, in actuality, the word used in Genesis 1:26 is the neutral term "person." The word often translated "man" in verse 26 is the Hebrew word, "adam." Adam refers to "dirt;" as it is stated, "out of the earth you have been formed." The word refers equally to both male and female persons depicted in this story. The word could be, and often is, translated as "humankind." It is not until verse 27, when the passage

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<sup>31</sup> J.I. Packer, "Understanding the Differences," in *Women, Authority and the Bible*, ed. Alvera Mickelsen (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 298-299.

<sup>32</sup> Raymond C. Ortlund, Jr., "Male-Female Equality and Male Headship: Genesis 1-3", in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 98.

<sup>33</sup> Raymond C. Ortlund, "Male-Female Equality and Male Headship," 98.

further defines the creation of people as male and female that words “ish” איש (male) and “isha” אשה (female) are used. To make this verse supportive of “male headship”—and God-ordaining of submission in gender relationships—is to do mischief with the text. The image-bearing here is for both males and females. The collective Hebrew word “adam” אדם, does not solely pertain to men. In fact, running throughout this description of the creation of humans is an implied submission before God, not of a creation-ordered submission based in Genesis 1.

The truth of the matter is that there are risks associated with a global application of any role-based paradigm for human behavior. This teaching may cause some men to feel that they have the right to do whatever is necessary to cause their wives to submit to their leadership. For example,

Rebellious and stubborn, that's what she is. And I believe firmly in the Bible. So I have the means...even hitting. I want to do and have done all that I can to make her like other women. You cannot stand the order of creation on its head. Only the man is the Lord of Creation, and he cannot allow himself to be dominated by womenfolk. So hitting has been my way of marking that I'm a man, a masculine man, no softie of a man, no cushy type.<sup>34</sup>

As is illustrated in this example, such views of male and female roles, coupled with extremely patriarchal images of God, can cause the potential for abuse to occur.

### **Abuse Survivors and Patriarchal Images of God**

The following case study indicates some of the challenges that can exist for women at intersection of abuse and patriarchy.

It was after the birth of her child that she came to counseling. She was struggling with memories of her father, did not want her daughter to have a relationship with her father and had guilt because she no longer wanted to go to church. “My Dad was a pillar of the church. He was an elder. Everyone looked up to him as a man

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<sup>34</sup> Catherine Clark Kroeger and Nancy Nason-Clark, *No Place for Abuse: Biblical & Practical Resources to Counteract Domestic Violence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 119.



of God," she reported. She also reported that her father, from the time that she was 10, was engaging in a sexually abusive relationship with her. "When I finally confessed this to my pastor three years later, he told me that I was lying, that my father was a 'God-fearing man' and would never do anything like that." Then she said haltingly, "He told me that if he DID do something to me it was because I was not being submissive to him. He told me that my father had to discipline me—I was a bad kid. And that was probably even more true because, if he was being sexual with me, it was because I was dressing in a provocative way. I'm finding it hard to trust a God who is named 'Father.'"

It was only after she got the courage to report him to the Department of Children and Families that the abuse stopped. Of course, she was also, at thirteen, ostracized from her church.<sup>35</sup>

The sad fact remains that in the United States, "a report of child abuse is made every ten seconds. Almost five children die every day as a result of child abuse. Of those, 75% are under the age of four."<sup>36</sup> Survivors of childhood abuse have often experienced their abuse at the hand of people they know; in fact, in the area of childhood sexual abuse, sixty-eight percent of survivors report that the abuse occurred at the hand of family members.<sup>37</sup> Often this comes from a parent. For such persons, images such as "Heavenly Father" or "Father Almighty" may be very difficult to incorporate into faith. Language around "Lord" or "submission," especially if that involves male imagery, may also be an area that is difficult to assimilate into a working knowledge of God and a Christian lifestyle.

Drs. Catherine Kroeger and Nancy Nason-Clark state in their book *No Place for Abuse*, "When the sexual violence is perpetrated by a father, uncle, brother, grandfather or another male relative, the victim must sort out myriad feelings, ambiguities and

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<sup>35</sup> Anonymous, Counseling by Author, North Shore of Boston, MA, 2005.

<sup>36</sup> Childhelp, "National Child Abuse Statistics," <http://www.childhelp.org/pages/statistics.html> (accessed July 1, 2011).

<sup>37</sup> Childhelp, "National Child Abuse Statistics," <http://www.childhelp.org/pages/statistics.html>, (accessed July 21, 2011).

contradictions. She may feel both love and hate. She may be dependent economically on the abuser or fear reprisal should her tale of abuse be voiced. Other times the violator is not a family member but a trusted adult—a coach, teacher or religious leader. Here too betrayal occurs: the sense of trust has been broken and the victim's vulnerability is marked."<sup>38</sup>

"I've had people who wrestle with the concept of God as Father," reports Rev. Michael Duda, Pastor of First Church of Hamilton & Wenham. "For some of these people, thoughts of God as a father bring to mind the abuse that went along with their own fathers."<sup>39</sup> One recent study suggests that, for many, there is an undercurrent of belief that males are more God-like and that, for some, the experience of abuse by a male authority figure and by male clergy, in particular, is experienced, not only as a betrayal by a trusted authority figure, but as being abused by God. "Victims of abuse find it incredibly difficult to understand why it is that God/Jesus did not protect them. They blame God/Jesus for their abuse. It's quite something to feel betrayed by your human family, but really huge to feel betrayed by an all-powerful deity."<sup>40</sup> For women who have been abused, "church just doesn't feel safe, because church...is where [the abuse] happens. Because of these women's experiences, the image of a male God, presumed by some scriptural interpretations to be primarily interested in men and male interests, is decidedly unattractive."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Kroeger, *No Place for Abuse*, 31.

<sup>39</sup> Rev. Michael Duda, Interview by author, Wenham, MA, October 1, 2010.

<sup>40</sup> Margaret Kennedy, "Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse—Survivors Informing the Care of Children Following Abuse," (paper presented to the Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2003).

<sup>41</sup> Rachel Stone, "Reading Scripture with Sex Abuse Survivors," *Her.meneutics: The Christianity Today Blog for Women*, entry posted June 30, 2011, [http://blog.christianitytoday.com/women/2011/06/laura\\_survived\\_a\\_rigid\\_and.html](http://blog.christianitytoday.com/women/2011/06/laura_survived_a_rigid_and.html). (accessed 6/30/2011).

Language in worship that is solely equated with masculine images for God may cause women survivors of abuse to feel removed from the God who is being worshiped. According to at least one author, "the form in which divine revelation was recorded [in the Bible]...reflects the male dominance of the times. Men were the principal readers in mind, with women only addressed by association."<sup>42</sup> Susan Juster states that patriarchal language evolved within the New England setting because of a normative need to advance a patriarchal image within revolutionary America and along with it a corresponding image of strength for the newly emerging country. "Familial metaphors...became the chief idiom through which the evangelical community envisioned its role...A kind of masculine self-fashioning can be glimpsed in the epistolary and sermon literature of the late eighteenth century as the evangelical clergy urged the faithful to take up arms against the British Antichrist."<sup>43</sup>

Whether or not the observations of Juster are accurate, it is the case that it may be difficult for those women who have been abused to embrace God's leading in her life if the church she attends uses solely male imagery to depict God. It is beneficial for a woman who has suffered abuse at the hand of a father or other loved male relative to know that while God has chosen to be revealed to humans as "Father," God has also been called other names throughout scripture.<sup>44</sup>

It is helpful to recognize that God is neither male nor female; in fact males and females both bear the image of God, and paternal images for God are "analogical." By

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<sup>42</sup> Glen G. Scorgie, *The Journey Back to Eden: Restoring the Creator's Design for Women and Men* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 100.

<sup>43</sup> Susan Juster, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics & Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 103.

<sup>44</sup> For example, Romans 8:15, Abba; Genesis 17:1, Almighty; Revelation 22:13, Alpha; Hebrews 12:2, Author of Our Faith; Jeremiah 33:15, Branch; John 6:33, Bread of God; Luke 2:11, Savior; Genesis 3:15, Seed; Isaiah 55:4, Witness.

understanding such things, female survivors of abuse can better understand the true nature of the God who desires to be worshiped. "The only way forward is to really get hold of the fact that God's true nature transcends our conceptual and linguistic capabilities and to stress that... Father and Son are analogical terms. They mean that the first two persons of the Trinity, in some limited ways, related to one another *like* a father and son might have related. For the church to move from its patriarchal past, it must understand that Father and Son are terms designed to witness to the shared nature and intimate love relationship between the two persons."<sup>45</sup>

Abuse survivors need to hear that God's grace was extended to them, not by a wrathful God who may remind them of an abusive Mom or Dad or some other such individual. Instead, they need to know that love was offered to them on the basis of true love. Bauckham states it well when he says, "because God is who God is in his gracious self-giving, God's identity is not simply revealed but enacted in the event of salvation for the world which the service and self-humiliation of his Son accomplishes."<sup>46</sup>

Furthermore, it is beneficial for abuse survivors to realize that it no longer is necessary to "conform to the patterns of this world," but rather, "to be transformed by the renewing of their minds."<sup>47</sup> An abuse survivor must learn new ways of interacting with others, especially if those people have either caused abuse in the past, or are abusive in her present life situation. She must be encouraged to seek help from others when necessary. She must also learn that allowing a person to abuse her may be a return to "patterns of this world," rather than reflecting appropriate "submission" to her abuser. For example, the following was recently included in the blog "Desiring God." It has since

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<sup>45</sup> Glen G. Scorgie, *The Journey Back to Eden*, 124.

<sup>46</sup> Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism & Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 68.

<sup>47</sup> Romans 12:2.

been removed from the website. The focus of this is still taught in many churches, however. One way of redeeming the language around submission is to not allow submission to be something it was never intended to be. Submission is never to be synonymous with “abuse.” The following, part of a question and answer period related to submission and abuse, seems to suggest the inappropriateness of a woman to follow her husband into a sinful practice, while supporting that “simply being abused” is a normative and appropriate thing for a woman of God. This is not representative of proper submission.

Therefore Christ’s word governs her life. And Christ has many words besides “Be submissive.” “Be submissive” is not an absolute, because her Lord has other things to tell her, so that if the husband tells her something that contradicts with what the Lord tells her, then she’s got a crisis of, “To whom do I submit now?” And clearly she submits to Jesus above her husband. The reason she is submitting to her husband is because of her prior superior submission to the Lord.

So if this man, for example, is calling her to engage in abusive acts willingly (group sex or something really weird, bizarre, harmful, that clearly would be sin), then the way she submits—I really think this is possible, though it’s a bit paradoxical—is that she’s not going to go there. I’m saying, “No, she’s not going to do what Jesus would disapprove even though the husband is asking her to do it.”

She’s going to say, however, something like, “Honey, I want so much to follow you as my leader. God calls me to do that, and I would love to do that. It would be sweet to me if I could enjoy your leadership. But if you ask me to do this, require this of me, then I can’t go there.”

Now that’s one kind of situation. Just a word on the other kind. If it’s not requiring her to sin but simply hurting her, then I think she endures verbal abuse for a season, and she endures perhaps being smacked one night, and then she seeks help from the church.<sup>48</sup>

Domestic violence is a very real problem in human relationships. Redemption of the language of submission requires a deeper awareness of the nature of this form of abuse.

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<sup>48</sup> John Piper, “What Should a Wife’s Submission to her Husband Look Like if He’s an Abuser?” Desiring God Blog, entry posted August 19, 2009, <http://www.desiringgod.org/blog> (accessed September 15, 2009).

## Domestic Violence

The following is an actual example of domestic abuse within a relationship:

She came to her counseling appointment, obviously shaken by what had occurred in her life. There seemed to be something deeper than her husband's cheating on her and his abuse of her that needed to be explored, however. "It doesn't matter what he did," she stated. "I am supposed to be submissive to him. I can save him if I return to him and if I am gentle to him. My pastor tells me that I must return to him. Divorce is wrong. And I deserve what has happened because I just didn't submit in the right way." She had been taught this by her church and encouraged by her family to return, in spite of the abuse that had occurred. Her story could have been the same story told by many abused women who find themselves at the wrong end of an interpretation of an important Christian concept; that of submission.<sup>49</sup>

Domestic violence, which is also known as domestic abuse, spousal abuse, family violence, and intimate partner violence (IPV), has been broadly defined as a pattern of abusive behaviors by one or both partners in an intimate relationship such as marriage, dating, family, friends or cohabitation. The resulting violence occurs in many forms, including physical aggression (hitting, kicking, biting, shoving, restraining, slapping, throwing objects), or threats to do so. It may result in sexual abuse, emotional abuse, or the control or domineering of the abused person. Intimidation or stalking may occur. Neglect may be used as a form of passive abuse. The abused person may be deprived economically.<sup>50</sup> Alcohol consumption and mental illness can also exist alongside the domestic violence. When present, it tends to make the abusive pattern worse.

Worldwide, one out of every four women reports having been abused. Domestic violence is a human cultural phenomenon. There are no limitations that are presented by

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<sup>49</sup> Anonymous, Counseling by Author, North Shore of Boston, MA, 2010.

<sup>50</sup> Lyn Shipway, *Domestic Violence: A Handbook for Health Professionals* (London: Routledge, 2004), 23.

class, color or religious persuasion.<sup>51</sup> This means that, within any dimension of human society, women who have been abused or who are presently being abused will be present. This includes communities of faith. In fact, "domestic violence is probably the number one pastoral mental health emergency."<sup>52</sup>

Christian families, then, are not exempt from patterns of domestic violence. Although religious families may be considered sacred, they are sometimes unsafe. In 1989, the Christian Reformed Church in North America conducted a survey among a small random sample of adult church members: 28 percent had experienced at least one form of abuse,<sup>53</sup> a figure close to those of national US samples not specifically targeting church-going families.

"In families of strong faith, many of the patterns that are observed within mainstream culture are intensified: the fear, the vulnerability, the isolation, the promise before God to stay together until *death do us part*. Although there is no compelling evidence that violence is more frequent or more severe in families of faith, religious women are more vulnerable *when abused*. They are less likely to leave, are more likely to believe the abuser's promise to change his violent ways, frequently espouse reservations about seeking community-based resources or shelters for battered women, and commonly express guilt—that they have failed their families and God in not being able to make the marriage work.<sup>54</sup> At the core of all family violence is the desire for

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<sup>51</sup> Nancy Nason-Clark, "When Terror Strikes at Home: The Interface Between Religion and Domestic Violence," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Volume 43, No. 3, (September 2004): 303.

<sup>52</sup> Andrew J. Weaver, 1993, "Psychological Trauma: What Clergy Need to Know," *Pastoral Psychology*, (1993): 408.

<sup>53</sup> Ann W. Annis and Rodger E. Rice, "A Survey of Abuse Prevalence in the Christian Reformed Church," *Journal of Religion & Abuse*, Volume 3, Issue 3-4, (2001): 7.

<sup>54</sup> Nason-Clark, "When Terror Strikes at Home," 303.

power and control.<sup>55</sup> This desire is not necessarily a result of the abuser's low self-esteem, dysfunctional childhood, economics, or the like. Abusive behavior is "first and foremost supported by an unspoken and subconscious belief system." This is often driven by a sense of entitlement.<sup>56</sup>

Abuse is a real problem within families, even within some families of faith. Submission should only occur within a growing relationship with God and within human relationships that are healthy.

### **Assisting Survivors**

Studies show that "religion can provide reassurance to victims of abuse who gain strength from the belief that God loves them unconditionally."<sup>57</sup> Likewise, "religiosity" is identified as a positive factor to helping abuse survivors to deal with their abusive experiences.<sup>58</sup> However, those same studies seem to support the concern that some areas of Christian teaching may be difficult for Christian survivors of abuse. In fact, some of these teachings may actually cause abuse survivors to see suffering abuse itself as redemptive,<sup>59</sup> in that abuse survivors may consider battering in a relationship as her cross to bear.<sup>60</sup> This is especially true if a survivor has learned to believe that adults are

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<sup>55</sup> See appendix, "Power and Control" wheel, page 160, for more specifics related to domestic violence. Developed by: Domestic Abuse Intervention Project, Duluth MN. Produced by: National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence.

<sup>56</sup> Joanne van Beek, "What's the Problem in Our Homes Today?" Peace and Safety in the Christian Home, <http://www.peaceandsafety.com> (accessed July 1, 2011).

<sup>57</sup> Philip Gilligan, "Considering Religion and Beliefs in Child Protection and Safeguarding Work: Is Any Consensus Emerging?" *Child Abuse Review*, Vol. 18 (February 2009): 94-110, February 2009.

<sup>58</sup> Gilligan, "Considering Religion".

<sup>59</sup> Margaret Kennedy, "Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse—the Survivor's Voice Leading to Change" *Child Abuse Review* Vol 9, 2, 2000.

<sup>60</sup> Nason-Clark, "When Terror Strikes at Home," 303.



not to be questioned<sup>61</sup> or if the believer has garnered a belief that God is male.<sup>62</sup>

Redeeming the language of submission involves learning just who needs to be obeyed, understanding that God has been revealed to humankind through many different “names,” and that an ongoing awareness of Christ’s central role in her life—some would identify this as “Lordship”—will enable a woman to become free from the tyranny of ongoing abuse.

For example, it is certainly the case that acknowledging Christ’s lordship provides “the freedom to [repudiate] all former gods [by] submitting to Christ’s absolute supremacy over all life”<sup>63</sup> including past and present forms of abuse. The person enters into a relationship with Christ in which she is informed of who she really is: a servant and loved daughter of Christ who is her beloved savior. “It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.”<sup>64</sup> Service to others comes under a relationship to Christ.

Because one definition of Κύριος (Lord) could be considered “One to whom all things belong,” this understanding of Christ as Lord may help to remove from the abused survivor the need to continue on with dysfunctional or painful family of origin interactions or other abusive patterns that have been challenging to his or her personal healing. If God is Lord in the Christian sense, the abuse survivor belongs entirely to God. This belief in Christ’s Lordship over believers is, of course, “rooted in a theme that pervades the Scriptures from beginning to end: the kingdom of God.”<sup>65</sup> If God owns all in the

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<sup>61</sup> Margaret Kennedy, “Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse—Survivors Informing the Care of Children Following Abuse.” (Paper presented to the Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2003.)

<sup>62</sup> Kennedy, “Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse”.

<sup>63</sup> M. J. Harris, *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., s.v. “Lord.”

<sup>64</sup> Colossians 3.24 (New International Version).

<sup>65</sup> Eric L. Johnson, “Christ, the Lord of Psychology,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* Vol. 25, (1997): 12.

kingdom, and a person is learning to be submissive to God, then old abusive patterns can begin to change. In fact, "far from being misogynistic, the gospel is truly good news for victims of [abuse], that whatever has been done to them (the least of these) has been done to Jesus, whose death and resurrection is "a living power that lifts us out of the black holes of our lives, that heals our wounds, that removes our shame."<sup>66</sup> Jesus' interactions with women were liberating. "[He] never...jeered at them for being female. The fact that it was God incarnate who modeled such attitudes is especially good news for women."<sup>67</sup>

Assisting survivors of abuse might be to allow them to see that while God is certainly portrayed in the Bible as King, Sovereign, and the "owner of the cattle of a thousand hills," God also has been revealed to human beings by the image of Shepherd, Child, Wounded One, Sacrificed One and Redeemer. The image of Lord ought not to remain at "I am bigger, stronger than you and you must give all that you have to me." The image of Lord of the Table—the broken, given and resurrected Savior—is one of humbleness and deep care for his beloved. Indeed, such submissiveness by a savior could be trusted. Nouwen states the relationship between believer and God poignantly with the thought "my heart is little, fearful and very timid...but you say, 'Come to my heart. My heart is gentle and humble and very broken like yours. Do not be afraid. Come and let your heart find rest in mine and trust that all will be well.'"<sup>68</sup> Submission goes far beyond gender roles. It is an attitude of giving all to God.

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<sup>66</sup> Rachel Stone, "Reading Scripture with Sex Abuse Survivors," *Her.meneutics*, The Christianity Today Blog for Women, entry posted June 30, 2011, <http://blog.christianitytoday.com/women/2011/06/laura> (accessed July 18, 2011).

<sup>67</sup> Scorgie, *The Journey Back to Eden*, 116.

<sup>68</sup> Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Eternal Seasons*, 192.

Abuse in relationships is contrary to God's assertion that all are created in his image. It is contrary to Jesus' protection of those who would be considered the last in society. It seems that a woman who has been abused has an opportunity to aid in the eventual submission and potential spiritual healing of her abuser if it is safe to do so. Submission, as it should properly be extended, realizes that there are limits and there are expectations on relationships. Thus, it is appropriate for a woman, regardless of whether her relationship is built upon complementarian or egalitarian expectations, to seek for healing of the relationship.

If the person who is abusive cannot hear her concerns, it seems that Jesus gave directions that could be applied to this situation. "As you enter the home, give it your greeting. If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave."<sup>69</sup> It is important to seek peace in interpersonal relationships. It is equally as important to not allow abuse to continue. The good news of the redemption of submission language is the reminder that submission is necessary for both men and women in terms of interpersonal relationships.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Matthew 10:13-14.

<sup>70</sup> If a woman needs to leave the person who is abusive, it may be important to enlist the help of different agencies or support in order to do that. For example, agencies on the North Shore of Boston that can aid in this situation include HAWC (Healing Abuse Working for Change) and PASCH (Peace and Safety in the Christian Home. Additionally Hagar's Sisters is a support group for those who find themselves living in abusive interpersonal relationships. Specifics on these resources can be found in the literature review.

## Research Project and Spiritual Formation Group

*..You have no power over my body, neither can you do me any harme, for I am in the hands of the eternall Jehovah my Saviour, I am at his appointment, the bounds of my habitation are cast in heaven...I feare none but the great Jehovah, which hath foretold me of these things...<sup>71</sup>[sic]*

— Anne Hutchinson at trial

### Anne Hutchinson's Example

Anne Hutchinson's willingness to preach about her beliefs eventually formed the basis for freedom of civil liberty and religious tolerance in the United States. During trial at Court at Newton, in 1637, Governor Winthrop brought the accusation of her troubling the peace of the Commonwealth and the churches, and stated that the gatherings led by her were "a thing not tolerable nor comely in the sight of God, nor fitting for your sex." After a trial of two days, Governor Winthrop stated, "Mrs. Hutchinson, the sentence of the court you hear is that you are banished from out of our jurisdiction as being a woman not fit for our society, and are to be imprisoned till the court shall send you away." To Anne Hutchinson's request that she be given an explanation as to why she was banished, the only response was, "Say no more. The court knows wherefore and is satisfied."<sup>72</sup>

Anne Hutchinson's willingness to speak in spite of the rules of the Commonwealth and the assertions of the Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony led to her eventual banishment from the colony. Her brother-in-law, Rev. John

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<sup>71</sup> Robert Ellsberg, "Anne Hutchinson, Puritan Prophet (1591-1643)" in *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets and Witnesses from Our Time*, (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), 251.

<sup>72</sup> "Anne Hutchinson Trial Transcript, Trial at the Court at Newton, 1637," <http://www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/bdorsey1/41docs/30-hut.html> (accessed, July 25, 2011).

Wheelwright, who also was banished from the colony due to having beliefs similar to those of Anne, eventually founded the town of Exeter, NH.<sup>73</sup>

Since the ability to speak out about beliefs and abuse is a key need for those who have suffered abuse, it seems fitting that the spiritual formation group that is the basis for this thesis project took place in Exeter. Many women who identify as having been abused would state that they sense they have “no voice” in regard to their abuse and little empowerment around exacting changes that will impact their wellbeing in interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships. To that end, Anne Hutchinson’s life circumstances and historical connections to the town of Exeter were particularly poignant for this study.

In order to tackle a redemption of “submission,” it is important to consider this “lack of a personal voice” that many abused women often feel and to provide places of healing and growth for those whose spiritual formation has been impacted by improper images of femininity and abuse. The spiritual formation group focused on increasing this personal voice for women who have suffered abuse. It also sought to increase this voice for women who do not report abuse, but who desire to increase their awareness of God and enter into a life more centrally located in obedience and submission to God while allowing for expression of and growth of God-given gifts.

#### “Discovering God, Discovering Yourself” Spiritual Formation Group

The project was a six-week spiritual formation group. It was called “Discovering God, Discovering Yourself” and took place at the First Baptist Church of Exeter NH. As hoped, the group included both women who reported no history of abuse, and those who reported having been abused.

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<sup>73</sup> “John Wheelwright Biography,” <http://www.bookrags.com>, (accessed, July 25, 2011).

This research took into account the above ways that churches have attempted to deal with the concepts of Lordship, submission, sin, male and female roles and imagery of God and aimed to discover whether or not women in a New England town (Exeter, NH) who identified as having been survivors of abuse, understood concepts related to submission differently than those who do not report abuse. In order to do this, a six-week spiritual formation group, aimed at considering these images of submission, took place. The group was presented with a pre-test and post-test.<sup>74</sup> The belief was that abused women's challenges with these concepts would be expressed in a pre-test that was given to the group and that there will changes in the viewpoint around submission that would be seen in the post-test. It was further hoped that submission—in its proper and freeing understanding—would become a redeemed concept within the life of these women.<sup>75</sup>

Further, the study took place in order to point toward changes needed in the Christian Church itself to begin to effectively redeem its language of submission. It did this by the objective changes reflected within the pseudo experiment itself, as well as subjective data gathered within the six-weeks of discussion generated by the group discussions. The hope desired was that these interactions will aid in the spiritual formation of abuse survivors and others and aid others in a vibrant, growth-based relationship with God and others, and that the women will have a renewed appreciation for the fact that they are wonderful creations of God.

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<sup>74</sup> See Appendix I, Pre-Assessment, page 147 and Appendix 2, Post-Assessment, page 149.

<sup>75</sup> Informed consent, pre and post-test questions and other material related to this study may be found in the appendix section of this document (Appendices 4, 5, and 6), pages 152-154.

### Demographics of the First Baptist Church of Exeter, NH and the Town of Exeter

The First Baptist Church of Exeter, NH, is presently in a growth period after having endured a decade or so of declining membership, concerns related to retention of church property and a change in church leadership; presently its membership is around 90 people. For three years the church has had Rev. Dr. Dee Swilling as its pastor and has decided to retain its church property; it is currently undergoing some renovations, including the sanctuary, which is the main worship space. The church has a congregationally-based form of leadership, is traditionally "New England Baptist" in its worship style (hymns, sermon, communion one time per month), and looks toward believer's baptism as a means of affirming belief and as a step toward membership. It is associated with the American Baptist Churches of the USA, the American Baptist Churches of Vermont and New Hampshire, the Southeastern Association of ABCVNH and the Exeter Clergy.<sup>76</sup> After the renewed focus toward growth, the church has begun reaching out to its neighbors, providing different seasonal festivals, a community Bible study, and a focus toward students who attend Phillips-Exeter Academy which is located directly behind the church.

Exeter is a town located in Rockingham County in New Hampshire. According to the 2010 census, the population was 14,306 people. Of those people, 9,242 reside in the urban portion of town. The racial makeup was 97.21% white, .46% Black or African American, .20% Native American, .92% Asian, .22% from other races, and .98% from two or more races. Hispanic or Latino of any race represents .77% of the population.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> First Baptist Church of Exeter, NH, <http://www.fbcexeter.org>, (accessed July 17, 2011).

<sup>77</sup> "American FactFinder" United States Census Bureau, <http://factfinder.census.gov>, (accessed July 20, 2011).

The town is home to Phillips Exeter Academy, which is a private college preparatory school.

Rockingham County has slightly higher house values, percentage of people owning their own homes, and family income than does the State of New Hampshire as a whole. Rockingham County also has a slightly higher rate of families residing in the same home for over a year than the rest of the State. Additionally, the County has a bit less racial diversity than the rest of New Hampshire, and workers travel slightly longer amounts of time to commute to work.<sup>78</sup>

While statistics related to abuse are not readily available, Rockingham County does have many mental health treatment centers that would provide assistance to those who find themselves abused. The town of Exeter itself has Seacoast Mental Health as well as many counselors in the Rockingham area that specialize in the treatment of domestic violence.

Exeter has many houses of worship. Other houses of worship, besides First Baptist Church of Exeter include: Christ Church (Episcopal), St Michael's Parish (Roman Catholic), Exeter Presbyterian Church, First Unitarian Universalist Society of Exeter, Faith Lutheran Church, First Church (United Church of Christ, Congregational), Exeter Congregational Church as well as others located in neighboring New Hampshire and Massachusetts towns.

The hope for this research was that the setting of Exeter, with its founding immersed in concepts of equality, could provide a good space for both women who have a history of abuse and those who have not had such a history to have a better understanding of the God who speaks and beckons to them from within the pages of the

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<sup>78</sup> "Rockingham County QuickFacts," <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/33/33015.html> (accessed July 17, 2011).



Bible. Further, is expressed the hope that Jesus' equal view of all people would empower and inspire those who take part, because, while it is "true that Jesus never explicitly contradicted prevailing assumptions about gender," he spoke loudly through his actions and attitudes and "he conducted himself in relation to women in ways that were quietly subversive of the status quo. It was not so much what he said, as how he related to women, that was revolutionary."<sup>79</sup>

Submission is an important concept for all Christian believers. While it will not do to relegate submission to solely a gender issue, this study, and subsequent chapters, will show that these concepts are not based only in a woman's need to be submissive, but for both men and women to be submissive to each other and to ultimately live a life in submission to God. It is hoped that a greater understanding of submission's central role in a vibrant Christian life will shine forth in this work and that the freedom of submission as it is expressed in Sabbath, Christ's centrality to life, baptism and other such things will broaden the view to encompass all Christian believers.

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<sup>79</sup> Scorgie, *The Journey Back to Eden*, 115.

## CHAPTER 2

### A THEOLOGY OF SURRENDER AND SUBMISSION

*Arise, my soul, arise;  
Shake off thy guilty fears;  
The bleeding sacrifice  
In my behalf appears:  
Before the throne my surety stands,  
Before the throne my surety stands,  
My name is written on his hands.*

—Charles Wesley, *Arise My Soul, Arise*

#### The Image of Humankind

For some women who have been abused, the story of the creation of humans asserts an astonishing fact: both men and women are made in the image of God. Scripture states, "Let us make humankind in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."<sup>1</sup> Image and likeness are integral thoughts throughout this passage: verse twenty-six, for example, can be seen as God's statement of intention. The verse includes the Hebrew terms *tselem* and *demuth*, translated respectively, "image" and "likeness."<sup>2</sup> These words were used to describe humans. From the beginning males and females are described as equal bearers of the image of God. In the New Testament this reality is picked up and described by the word εἰκών (eikon, or icon).<sup>3</sup> Later, authors using Latin would describe this as "*Imago Dei*," the

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1:26 (ESV).

<sup>2</sup> Millard J Erickson, *Christian Theology* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 1998), 495.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:7 Ἀνὴρ μὲν γὰρ οὐκ ὀφείλει κατακαλύπτεσθαι τὴν κεφαλὴν εἰκὼν καὶ δόξα θεοῦ ὑπάρχων· ἡ γυνὴ δὲ δόξα ἀνδρός ἐστίν.

image of God. Both men and women—those survivors of abuse and those who never experienced abuse—all bear this image.

God placed the Imago Dei within a community, echoing God's own relationship as a community, by stating, "It is not good for man to be alone."<sup>4</sup> Many followers of Christ understand God to be a community of three-persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Some Greek theologians postulated this as "perichoresis," the Greek word for dance. "Imagine a folk dance...with three partners in each set...on signal from the caller, they release hands, change partners, and weave in and out...but there is no confusion...each person maintains his or her own identity in the dance."<sup>5</sup>

In order for the dance to work, communication, trust and willingness to defer to each other's "leadership" in the dance must occur between the three partners. This is the relationship God has within himself<sup>6</sup> and extended to humans to have, both in terms of a dance with God and a dance with each other. And this form of "dance" was status quo to the Prototypical Pair, representing their status—male and female—as the icon of God.

This image of God "was not only endowed with *justitia originalis*, that is, with full obedience to their Creator in faith and love; but also with all the perfection of human endowments in body, mind and spirit. Their complete innocence therefore was not merely that of children or of primitive man; rather it was that of fully mature human beings in union with God, who possessed, to an unlimited extent, "the *liberum arbitrium*, that is, a freedom of the will which was limited by nothing save the Command of God."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Genesis 2:18.

<sup>5</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William b. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 45.

<sup>6</sup> In regard to Jesus' submission, Philippians 2:1-11.

<sup>7</sup> Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1947), 85.

The icon, or Image of God, was perfect in its interaction with God. The reflection was happily not God. The copy resided in the love of God and resided in the love that each human had for the other.

### The Fall of Humanity

Once the reader of Genesis navigates beyond the creation story, a problem for humanity becomes apparent. This can be seen in Genesis 3, the chapter frequently entitled, "The Fall of Humanity." Eve has been tempted by the serpent<sup>8</sup>, which, in glowing statements about her eventual glory, lies to her and in the process "appeals to the human desire to be like God. This is a right and reasonable desire. The later command, 'ye shall be holy; for I the LORD your God am holy' (Lev 19:2; Matt 5:48), makes it clear that man is possessive of the potentiality to become like God—in character."<sup>9</sup>

John Wesley speaks well of the desire to have one's image of God become more than just God's character. If you eat, says the serpent, "Your eyes shall be opened - You shall have much more of the power and pleasure of contemplation than now you have; you shall fetch a larger compass in your intellectual views, and see farther into things than now you do. You shall be as gods - As Elohim, mighty gods, not only omniscient but omnipotent too: You shall know good and evil - That is, everything that is desirable to be known."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> While the biblical chapter referenced does not indicate that "Satan" (the accuser) was present, this work will assume that Satan is symbolically represented by the serpent in the story.

<sup>9</sup> *The Interpreter's Bible (Volume I)* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1952), 505.

<sup>10</sup> John Wesley, "John Wesley's Notes on the Bible," Wesleyan Heritage Publishing, <http://wesleyanheritage.com> (accessed July 15, 2011).

The image wanted to become God. "The copy want[ed] to be the model itself."<sup>11</sup> The copy did not understand that "everything is mine precisely because everything is God's. If it were not God's, it could never be mine. If it could not be mine, God would not even want it for Himself. And all that is God's is His very Self. All that God gives me becomes, in some way, my own self. What then is mine? God is mine. And what is God's? I am God's."<sup>12</sup> The copy also did not understand that "this likeness is to come through submission to God's will. The serpent in telling the woman that likeness to God is to be achieved by defiance of his command tacitly suggests that the likeness which is within human reach is likeness *not in character but in power*. He suggests that man can make himself the equal of God." <sup>13</sup>

Humans "fell" when the decision was made to not submit to God but rather to attempt to find another way to God's wisdom, understanding and desires for human wellbeing. According to this story, as a result humans became self-focused and aware of the limitations that resided within their naked and vulnerable bodies—and the naked and vulnerable souls that were to be shared with each other. As a result, humans began to live in a false self, just as Adam and Eve attempted to do by "[hiding] themselves from the presence of God among the trees of the garden."<sup>14</sup>

What is being spoken of here is the story of human sin. "Sin" in Hebrew is typically some variety of the word "chet" or "het." This word has at its core an attitude not so much of evil, but rather of "making a mistake."<sup>15</sup> The thought of "missing the mark"

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<sup>11</sup> Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, 133.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Starus and Cudahy, 1961), 34.

<sup>13</sup> *The Interpreter's Bible*, 505.

<sup>14</sup> Genesis 3:8.

<sup>15</sup> *The Interpreter's Bible*, 505.

has at its core the reality that humans are fallible, and are given to making bad choices. When one sins, one “misses the mark.” The New Testament is also in agreement with this. The Greek word translated “sin”, “*ἁμαρτία*”, also carries within it the connotation of missing the mark.<sup>16</sup>

Simple human existence was, in a sense, lost—at least momentarily—as the result of Primal Sin. “All human sin has an element of weakness; it is mingled with anxiety for one’s life, a fear of losing something by obedience to God; thus it is a lack of confidence, a fear of venturing all on God alone; it is not simply impudence, but anxiety about oneself.”<sup>17</sup> In fact, this “fundamental guilt, this guilt we feel from the mere fact that we are human beings, is associated with original sin. This sense of guilt is based on the illusion of separation and alienation...namely, that we are split off from God...it is a ‘bad dream’ all humans dream...we feel we are split off from God, others and even ourselves...we feel we are bad, wrong, inferior, guilty...It is our original shame.”<sup>18</sup>

This is so, even though God desires relationships with human beings. The truth of the love of God for human beings is depicted throughout the pages of both the Old Testament and the New Testament. The antidote, so to speak, to the problem of shame, guilt and inability to live as a true self before God came by way of the Son, who willingly submitted himself to the guilt and shame of the cross. God’s love cannot be controlled by the wiles of Satan or by humanity.

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<sup>16</sup> James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, Greek Dictionary of the New Testament, (McLean, VA: MacDonald Publishing Company), 11.

<sup>17</sup> Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, 132.

<sup>18</sup> John Jacob Raub, *Who Told You that You Were Naked? Freedom from Judgment, Guilt and Fear of Punishment* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 21.

### God's Image

This is the case because from the very beginning, God came to humans as the “uncontrollable one.” When Moses interacted with God at the burning bush, God did not answer Moses’ question regarding a name by providing one that was similar to the names of the gods that other cultures would have been worshiped during that time. When Moses asked, “Who shall I say sent me?” to bring the people out of Egypt, God stated, “Tell them ‘I will be who I will be’ sent you.”<sup>19</sup>

In many ways, God’s presentation of the Name at this place was in relation to Moses’ fear. God’s name provided a guarantee of the promise that God made to him in Exodus 3:12: “I will be with you.” In this case, God was very much Moses’ helper. God, who exists in relationship and by way of the “dance” depicted above, became available exactly at the point of need that existed for Moses. God was not portrayed as a god of stone, established at the hand of humans to perform human bidding. On the contrary, God initiated the interaction. God provided the direction. Moses knew that the place upon which he was standing was holy ground. He was communicating with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Moses was submitting to God’s direction for the life of the Israelites at that moment in time. Moses was also submitting to God’s desires for Moses in all of this.

Moses’ interaction with God at the burning bush could perhaps be seen as a symbol of God’s desire to remain in constant communication with created humans. Certainly in interactions with humans, “God wished to reveal Himself in and through created things by communicating to them as much of his own goodness and glory as

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<sup>19</sup> אהיה אשר אהיה

they were capable of receiving.”<sup>20</sup> God did not ask Moses to be God. In fact, God did not wish for any humans to be God. Rather, God wished men and women to be humanity, dependent and receiving from the Spirit all that was necessary for a good life upon this earth. It is this “dependency and receiving” from God that is difficult for those who have been abused to integrate into life. This is because life often consists of needing to gain control of dangerous situations. Such a life is, by necessity, not based in trust. Trust can be dangerous. By extension, it is hard to allow God to be God.

Allowing “God to be God” is the center of Christian living and allows peripheral things to remain as such. In the end, the true Christian life is a life lived in submission to God and also with a willingness to be submissive, when appropriate, to others in one’s life. Such submission is living life with the reality that there is nothing humanity must clamor for in order to be approved by God; it is living knowing “the Christian life is a Jesus-resurrection life, a life that is accomplished by the Spirit.”<sup>21</sup> This is the true model of how humanity was to function. A woman who has been abused can begin to live past that abuse if she is able to allow God to be central in her life. She is able to make the decision that will allow her to begin to become free from the tyranny of abuse.

### **Submission to God and Others**

#### A Vocabulary of Submission

Submission, as a way of life, is carried from the Old Testament to the New Testament, as well. The spirit of this way of living is seen in words often translated as “submit,” “surrender,” and “obey.” For example, the word ὑποτάσσο (hupotasso) is

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<sup>20</sup> Andrew Murray, *Humility: The Beauty of Holiness* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1980), 18.

<sup>21</sup> Peterson, *Ten Thousand Places*, 300.



frequently translated “to submit.” It means to rank or to place under.<sup>22</sup> This implies that one is willing to allow another to be in a position of authority in that person’s life, much as stated in the Ten Commandments, “you must honor your mother and father...”<sup>23</sup>

An example of this is found in James 4:7, “Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.” It can be seen that at the core of this is the understanding that Satan the accuser will leave believers alone if they reside under the authority of God. “No doubt these evil desires are very strong; but God is stronger and he gives his strength to all who submit themselves to him. The devil knows this; and so he will flee in panic from all who resist his advances. No matter how defiant or rebellious a [person] has been, if he [or she] will turn to God...and submit...to the Lord, he [or she] will be welcomed and lifted up.”<sup>24</sup>

The same is true in the related word *surrender*. The English word surrender means to permit oneself to be subjected to something<sup>25</sup> “It carries the implication of putting one’s full weight on someone or something. It involves letting go—a release of effort, tension and fear. And it—and the related concept of submission—involves trust. One cannot let go of self-dependence and transfer dependence to someone else without trust.”<sup>26</sup> This is an important thing to remember: “Surrender to anything other than love would be idiocy. Alarm bells should go off when we hear of people surrendering to

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<sup>22</sup> James 4:7, ὑποτάγητε οὖν τῷ θεῷ, ἀντίστητε δὲ τῷ διαβόλῳ καὶ φεύζεται ἀφ’ ὑμῶν.

<sup>23</sup> Exodus 20:12.

<sup>24</sup> *The Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes: Volume 12* (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1957), 42.

<sup>25</sup> Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online, s.v. “Surrender,” <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/surrender> (accessed June 10, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> David G. Benner, *Surrender to Love: Discovering the Heart of Christian Spirituality* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 10.

abusive relationships.”<sup>27</sup> It cannot be said too strongly that submission and abuse cannot coexist. This must be the case in the relationships that play out in the community of faith, whether within the church or within the Christian family. It ought not to be stated otherwise to a woman who has suffered abuse. There is a sense of freedom here for a woman who has suffered abuse. The language of submission is redeemed when it is appropriately used in the context of a person who has been abused.

One New Testament word that is interpreted as surrender is παραδιδωμι (*paradidomi*). This word essentially means to “entrust, or hand over.”<sup>28</sup> A verse such as 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13:3 is translated in the new NIV as: If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.<sup>29</sup> Surrender, then, ought not to be construed as a process of giving something up because it is demanded by someone stronger which is often the case in situations of abuse. Instead, “to hand something over” implies that it is a personal choice. This is not something wrested from another on the basis of gender, strength, abuse, or authority. It is a personal choice and is carried out in relationships with others as well as with God.

*Obedience* is also an important related word in this discussion. The author of Matthew indicates that obedience only is to be given to those having true authority in another person’s life. For example, the word translated “obey” in the story of Jesus in the boat in a storm (Matthew 8:23-27) is the Greek word, ὑπακούω (*hupakowo*). Jesus’ disciples are terrified in the storm, and awaken Jesus. Jesus rebukes the waves. The

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<sup>27</sup> Benner, *Surrender to Love*, 59.

<sup>28</sup> *Paradidomi*, *Bible Works*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition, Bible Works Greek LXX/BNT.

<sup>29</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:3 κἂν ψωμίσω πάντα τὰ ὑπάρχοντά μου καὶ ἐὰν παραδῶ τὸ σῶμά μου ἵνα καυχῆσμαι, ἀγάπην δὲ μὴ ἔχω, οὐδὲν ὠφελοῦμαι.

disciples are astonished. "Who IS this that even the winds and waves obey him?" This Greek word literally means "to obey."<sup>30</sup> The waves obey him because he is God. There are other instances that use the same word; for example, when children are informed that they must obey their parents and slaves must obey their masters.

It must be well-noted: true authority exists only when love is present. True authority is never subservient to abuse. A woman who is being abused ought not to consider her abuser to be her "authority." A woman who is abused must respect God whose authority indicates to her that she is his beloved. God wishes her to be free, not to be bound to abusive patterns. God is the ultimate authority.

Besides the word authority, another word that is used in relation to obedience is recorded in Acts 5:29. In this verse, the disciples asserted, "We must obey God rather than people!" In this case, the Greek used is the word *πειθαρχειν* (*peiqarcein*) This word means to "obey the authority of."<sup>31</sup> The disciples are stating that God's authority requires their obedience before it is extended to any other person. It is to God that they must first offer respect.

The disciples were learning to live in obedience to God. "Holy obedience... 'is the insatiable God-hunger that will make a person dissatisfied with anything less than the pearl of great price. Holy obedience is the joyful abandon of the person who will sell absolutely everything to buy the field...it is a God-intoxicated life that can embrace wealth or poverty, hunger or plenty, crucifixion or acclaim with equal ease at the word of Christ.'"<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Hupakowo, *Bible Works*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition.

<sup>31</sup> *Peiqarcein*, *Bible Works*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition.

<sup>32</sup> Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, 94.

For a woman who has been abused, “joyful abandonment” occurs when she is able to embrace a view of herself as someone whom God sees as precious and worthy of being safe. That means letting go of the need to live within abusive interactive patterns in relationships. It may seem counterintuitive to say so, but letting go of such patterns often come with a sense of loss. These behaviors, after all, have kept the woman safe. Letting these things go is allowing herself to only be satisfied with that “pearl of great price,” the submission that is the core to her healing and to her growth.

Terms such as submission, surrender and obedience are sometimes viewed as setting punishing limitations upon a human’s psyche. Rather than punishing, however, these terms, when applied appropriately, tend to lead toward freedom. Jesus’ comment “my yoke is easy and my burden is light”<sup>33</sup> may sound contradictory to the idea of freedom. But if an abused woman, for example, is yoked to Jesus and listening to the love that Jesus has for her, all other negative viewpoints from others, or life’s old historical patterns that may include abuse, begin to pass away. They are replaced, instead, with freedom.

A modern illustration might help to clarify the focus of submission, surrender and obedience. It is the meekest horse that wins the race. By this is meant that the horse that responds the best to his trainer, who allows his strength and fortitude to be directed in the proper way by taking the bit and allowing small motions by its rider to direct it, will win the race. It is not the most “self-assured” horse, or the most “independent” horse. Such horses will always lose the race. They simply cannot be trained. They cannot submit to their trainer. They cannot become the race horse they were intended to be.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Matthew 11:30.

<sup>34</sup> Haddon Robinson, (Chapel Service, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, South Hamilton, MA, Fall 2009).

Jesus was right. The meek will inherit the earth.<sup>35</sup> This is submission. This is surrender. This is obedience. True biblical submission allows God to help restore the human true self—the beloved, finite Child of God.

#### Finiteness and Reverence as Submission

*He ever lives above,  
For me to intercede;  
His all redeeming love,  
His precious blood, to plead:  
His blood atoned for all our race,  
His blood atoned for all our race,  
And sprinkles now the throne of grace.*

—Charles Wesley, *Arise, My Soul, Arise*

Humans are finite. “Finiteness means that there are practical limitations to all of our accomplishments. While humanity has made great progress in physical feats, that progress is not unlimited. A human may now execute a high jump of seven feet, but it is unlikely that anyone will, within our atmosphere, ever jump a thousand feet without the aid of artificial propulsion.”<sup>36</sup>

This truth about humanity “means that we need not always be right. We need not fear failing. Only God never fails or never makes a mistake. It is not necessary for us, then, to make excuses for our shortcomings or to be defensive because we are not perfect. Yet awareness of our finiteness often leads to feelings of insecurity that we attempt to overcome through our own efforts.”<sup>37</sup> Such a message may be very contrary to the messages frequently transmitted from an abuser to an abused woman.

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<sup>35</sup> Matthew 5:5.

<sup>36</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 514.

<sup>37</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 515.

This desire for perfection is a problem harkening back to the Primal Sin in the Garden. Rather than trusting God as the Source of our Being, the desire is to place the locus for salvation within the human's ability to persevere. There is something in the state of being human that finds it difficult to trust God's love and care. This "missing the mark" also brings with it the tendency to miss winning "the prize." Without respecting human limitations and God's greatness, life can sometimes assume a shadowy, anxious existence. Reverence in regard to human limitations and God's omnipotence is freeing.

To be reverent means to become aware of life's fleetingness, of its temporary state and God's true ultimate control of it all. This reverence may be seen in the following conversation:

And I drew, too, the way my father once looked at bird lying on its side against the curb near our house. It was Shabbos and we were on our way back from the synagogue.

"Is it dead, Papa?" I was six and could not bring myself to look at it.

"Yes," I heard him say in a sad and distant way.

"Why did it die?"

"Everything that lives must die."

"Everything?"

"Yes."

"You, too, Papa? And Mama?"

"Yes."

"And me?"

"Yes," he said. Then he added in Yiddish, "But may it be only after you live a long and good life, my Asher."

I couldn't grasp it. I forced myself to look at the bird. Everything alive would one day be as still as that bird?

"Why? I asked.

"That's the way the Ribbono Shel Olom made his world, Asher."

"Why?"

"So life would be precious, Asher. Something that is yours forever is never precious."<sup>38</sup>

Only that which is eternal may last forever. Proper reverence for life takes such things into account. According to Paul Woodruff, "reverence begins in a deep

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<sup>38</sup> Chaim Potok, *My Name is Asher Lev* (New York: Anchor Books, 1972), 156.

understanding of human limitations; from this grows the capacity to be in awe of whatever we believe lies outside our control—God, truth, justice, nature, even death... simply put, reverence is the virtue that keeps human beings from trying to act like gods.<sup>39</sup>

Reverence is also a virtue that allows people to place possessions and others things at their proper place within life. A resulting simplicity of living occurs where one can affirm both the “goodness and limitation of material things. The material world is good, but it is a limited good—limited to the sense that we cannot make a life out of it. To deny the goodness of the created order is to be an ascetic. To deny the limitations of the created order is to be a materialist.”<sup>40</sup> There is freedom that occurs when life is no longer focused in the need to buffer oneself from the challenges of life by the accumulation of things or of buffering oneself from other people in one's life. Freedom with a locus in reverence also protects a person from fear related to one's state of mortality and the passage of time—and, in the case of abuse, one's abuser.

Reverence allows for the finiteness of humanity, its need for God, its frequent need for rest and its need to be grounded in the reality of time. “The understanding and honoring of time is fundamental to who we are and how we live. Violations of sacred time become desecrations of our most intimate relations with God and one another. Hours and days, weeks and months and years, are the very stuff of holiness.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Paul Woodruff, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue* (Oxford: University Press, 2001), 3.

<sup>40</sup> Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, 9.

<sup>41</sup> Peterson, *Christ Plays in 10,000 Places*, 65.

Sabbath—God Is Sovereign; Humans Are Finite

*Awesome One, your command forbids work.  
I'll merit royal splendor when I keep Shabbat.  
I'll offer gifts to the awesome One, fragrant sacrifices.  
A Shabbat of rest.  
This is Israel's...*

—Lawrence A. Hoffman, *My People's Prayer Book*

God placed in the Ten Commandments a call toward humanness. At the core of a day of rest is finiteness, the awareness of God's call for rest and for justice—often something that seems very elusive to a victim of abuse—to be extended to one's community. "The reason given [for Sabbath] in Deuteronomy is that when God's people were slaves in Egypt it was work, work, work—incessant, unrelieved work; they must never themselves perpetuate such oppression; they must quit work each seventh day ...the [reason given in Exodus] supports a life of believing in God; the Deuteronomy reason supports a life of love—Sabbath-keeping is a way to love your neighbor, a simple act of justice."<sup>42</sup>

The Ten Commandments themselves are also based in reverence to God.<sup>43</sup> Keeping of Sabbath is a tangible way of understanding the human finite state, an important thing for a survivor of abuse who may feel the need to be very strong in order to simply exist. The commandment regarding rest reads: "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work." Marva Dawn, in her book on Sabbath, makes the observation "the Jewish understanding of Sabbath embraced a special twenty-four hour rest time that was different from every other day.

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<sup>42</sup> Peterson, *Christ Plays in 10,000 Places*, 111.

<sup>43</sup> I am the LORD your God...you shall have no other gods before me. Exodus 20:2-3.



Other days of the week were given over to work.”<sup>44</sup> But Sabbath was different. “The Sabbath reminded people that they were finite...they could not constantly be on the go. There were limits to their energy. And to honor these limitations was to honor the infinite God, who himself worked and rested.”<sup>45</sup> In other words, “Sabbath is God’s way of saying, “Stop. Notice your limits. Don’t burn out.”<sup>46</sup> It is a time when “the presence of something that arises when we consecrate a period time to listen to what is most deeply beautiful, nourishing and true.”<sup>47</sup>

The observance of Sabbath also has other important purposes. Sabbath ought to lead to an understanding that God is sovereign. For example, God is the authority of time. Sabbath begins at nightfall. At night, one goes to bed, surrenders to sleep and into the care of God, a symbol of the reality that humans cannot control all things. “We wake into a world we didn’t make, into a salvation we didn’t earn.”<sup>48</sup>

Besides pointing one toward God’s authority around time, Sabbath also points an individual away from the present emphasis on individualism and self-sufficiency that exists within North American society. Sabbath works best when in community with others. “...The way of Israel and Church is to embed Sabbath-keeping in weekly acts of worship in the company of the people of God. We keep Sabbath best when we enter a

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<sup>44</sup> Marva J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 41.

<sup>45</sup> Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, 41.

<sup>46</sup> Adele Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 40.

<sup>47</sup> Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives* (New York: Bantam Books, 1999), 8.

<sup>48</sup> Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, 58.

place of worship, gather with a congregation, and sing and pray and listen to God...creation rhythms get inside us through the act of worship in place and time.”<sup>49</sup>

Human beings, then, do not exist on the basis of their labor or of their independence or self-sufficiency. Neither should work be the defining element of humanity, even though it was ordained prior to Adam and Eve’s fall in the Garden.<sup>50</sup> In fact, “If we do not allow for a rhythm of rest in our overly busy lives, illness becomes our Sabbath—our pneumonia, our cancer, our heart attack, our accidents create Sabbath for us.”<sup>51</sup> Work cannot save humankind, even though it may be nourishing physically, emotionally and spirituality.

True submission is based in a Sabbath-keeping focus. This can be seen in the following quote from Kushner:

Every morning shortly before awakening, a traditional Jew recites this prayer: ‘The soul that you have given me, O God, is pure. You fashioned it, you breathed it into me, you keep body and soul together. One day you will take it from me, only to restore it to me in time to come. So long as I have my soul, I must acknowledge you as my God and the God of my ancestors, the God of all souls. Praised are you O Lord who restores the soul to a lifeless body.’<sup>52</sup>

“There is astounding wisdom in the traditional Jewish Sabbath; that it begins precisely at sundown, whether that comes at a wintry 4:30 or late on a summer evening. Sabbath is not dependent upon our readiness to stop. We do not stop when we are finished. We do not stop when we complete our phone calls, finish our project, get

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<sup>49</sup> Peterson, *Christ Plays in 10,000 Places*, 112.

<sup>50</sup> Genesis 2.

<sup>51</sup> Muller, *Sabbath*, 20.

<sup>52</sup> Harold S. Kushner, *The Lord is My Shepherd: Healing Wisdom of the Twenty-third Psalm* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 57.

through this stack of messages, or get out this report that is due tomorrow. We stop because it is time to stop.<sup>53</sup>

This stopping and surrendering focus runs counter to much of current North American culture. The typical greeting, even amongst Christians is not, "How is your spiritual life?" but, rather, "What are you doing these days?" The usual response to that question is not "Oh, I have been spending time just being with God and building that relationship." Rather it is typically, "I am busy." Such a response seems sacrosanct to 21<sup>st</sup> century ears. It gains others' respect. It is not, however, based in reverence. It is not based in the freedom of true submission. This freedom runs counter to what the demands may be for an abused woman.

Often the reality is that it is hard to be quiet and to listen to what might be underneath the veneer of hard work. "This is one of our fears of quiet; if we stop and listen, we will hear this emptiness. If we worry we are not good or whole inside, we will be reluctant to stop and rest...if we are terrified of what we will find in rest, we will refuse to look up from our work, refuse to stop moving."<sup>54</sup>

In a sense, being busy allows an abused person to remove herself from any pain related to her situation. "When we move too fast we shield ourselves from the actual experience of suffering; we see only its outward manifestations and appearances. In our frantic craving for relief, we try to make the symptoms go away. But we risk eradicating the symptoms without ever understanding the disease."<sup>55</sup> Submission in Sabbath is truly freedom in life.

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<sup>53</sup> Muller, *Sabbath*, 82.

<sup>54</sup> Muller, *Sabbath*, 83.

<sup>55</sup> Muller, *Sabbath*, 167.

## Conclusion

*My God is reconciled;  
His pardoning voice I hear;  
He owns me for his child;  
I can no longer fear:  
With confidence I now draw nigh,  
With confidence I now draw nigh,  
And, "Father, Abba, Father," cry.*

—Charles Wesley, *Arise, My Soul, Arise*

The same God, who won the War against Satan through the gift of the Son, desires human relationship. In order to have this relationship, a person must allow herself to be directed by God. This requires submission to the Love that God wishes to give to beloved children. It is necessary to realize that if one's allegiances lie with Christ that true love is the core of it. In fact, "Christ died for us all, so that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again."<sup>56</sup>

A life of submission means living within the fact that God, who loved humankind in the Garden enough to solve the problem from the cross, is the same God who allows people the opportunity to surrender themselves to that love. That surrendering means safety. The English word surrender carries the implication of putting one's full weight on someone or something. It involves letting go—a release of effort, tension and fear. And it involves trust. Trust is "a way of living [that allows for] a deeper awareness of God's activity in our lives. One cannot let go of self-dependence and transfer dependence to someone else without it."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:15.

<sup>57</sup> Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 60.

## Trust

Trust must be central. The meekest horse that was considered earlier had complete trust in his trainer. Such trust typically does not come overnight. From the beginning the horse must learn that his trainer means him no harm and no abuse to him. Even before a saddle is placed on him, he learns confidence in his abilities as a horse. He learns that his owner's care of him is for his own good, even when he may not like the activity. He is so in touch with his rider that the slightest motion is understood. He knows whether to run faster, to slow down, to stop, to turn, all on the basis of the relationship of trust. The horse knows the rider. The rider knows the horse, strengths, vulnerabilities and weaknesses, all. This is true freedom.

Submission without trust is simply an oxymoron. The message that should be delivered to survivors of abuse is, in part, the message that humans are not to be self-sufficient souls. And, unlike a relationship based in control such as an abusive relationship, God desires a real relationship with the woman. There is a partnership in her spiritual formation. One is to "work out [one's] own salvation with fear and trembling;<sup>13</sup> for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure."<sup>58</sup> It is necessary to work at one's relationship with God, just like it is necessary to work at the interpersonal relationships within one's life.

But that relationship also requires realizing that "becoming a disciple is a matter of giving up your life as you have understood it to that point. Jesus made this starkly clear in Luke 14 and elsewhere. And without that 'giving up,' you cannot be his disciple, because you will still think that you are in charge and just need in need of a little help from Jesus for your project of a successful life."<sup>59</sup> A person who has been abused

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<sup>58</sup> Philippians 2:12b-13.

<sup>59</sup> Foster, *Renovations of the Heart*, 243.

frequently sees herself in that grid of “abused,” needing to obey the demands of the abuser. Submission to Christ means that Christ is all. She no longer can “obey” another’s unholy view of her.<sup>60</sup>

Abused women have suffered because of other peoples’ sin. Those who help these women navigate the guilt, shame and pain of abuse must be gentle in directing them toward obedience to God. Submitting to God must not be an endeavor that is reflective of abusive patterns of the past: “Why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules?”<sup>61</sup> What can be done? “It is clear...God does not want mere behavioral compliance. He wants obedience in both conduct and heart.”<sup>62</sup> It is hard to get to obedience of the heart when obedience of conduct is the sole focus. Complying with expectations for her behavior has probably been the place where an abused woman has resided in terms of interactions with others and, even, with God. God desires to free her from abusive patterns of the past.

#### Call toward Transparency

Equally as freeing for an abused woman is the reality that she is asked not to hide the reality of her abuse from God. “Transformation demands that we meet God in the vulnerability of our sin and shame rather than retreating to try to get on with our self-improvement projects. But it also requires that we stay long enough in his loving presence to allow our shame to melt away. For love to transform us, not only must we

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<sup>60</sup> It is important to note that even though she may be submissive to Christ, her abuser may not be. Especially in situations of physical abuse, it will be necessary to assist this woman to find physical safety. An abuser often finds threatening the lack of control he now feels as the result of the woman's submission to Christ as it relates to his abusive behavior to her. See “Control wheel” in appendix.

<sup>61</sup> Colossians 2:20.

<sup>62</sup> Benner, *Surrender to Love*, 57.

meet in vulnerability, we must also linger long enough for it to penetrate our woundedness.”<sup>63</sup>

An abused woman must learn to be emptied before God, and listen to God and allow God to fill that space, for “all life has emptiness at its core; it is the quiet hollow reed through which the music of God blows and makes the music that is our lives.”<sup>64</sup> As stated by Thomas Kelly,

Self is emptied into God, and God in-fills it. In glad, amazed humility we cast on Him our little lives in trusting obedience, in erect, serene and smiling joy. And we say, with a writer of Psalms, ‘Lo, I come: in the book of the law it is written of me, I delight to do Thy will, O my God. (40:7—8). For nothing else in all of heaven or earth counts so much as his will, his slightest wish, his faintest breathing. And holy obedience sets in, sensitive as a shadow, obedient as a shadow, selfless as a shadow...<sup>65</sup>

It is seldom “easy to enter into the silence and reach beyond the many boisterous and demanding voices of our world and...discover there the small intimate voice saying: You are my Beloved Child, on you my favor rests.”<sup>66</sup> Fear will, at least initially, be involved. “It is very hard to allow emptiness to exist in our lives. Emptiness requires a willingness not to be in control, a willingness to let something new and unexpected happen.”<sup>67</sup> But if submission to Christ is an integral part of an abuse survivor’s life, that person will learn to accept that Christian surrender is “saying yes to God’s Yes! To me.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Benner, *Surrender to Love*, 83.

<sup>64</sup> Muller, *Sabbath*, 8.

<sup>65</sup> Thomas R. Kelly, “The Shepherd in Search of Lost Obedience,” in *Spiritual Classics: Selected Readings on the Twelve Spiritual Disciplines*, ed. Richard J. Foster and Emilie Griffin, (New York: HarperOne, 2000), 178.

<sup>66</sup> Nouwen, *Beloved*, 77.

<sup>67</sup> Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey*, 55.

<sup>68</sup> Benner, *Surrender to Love*, 66

A woman who has been abused has true freedom in a relationship with Christ. The expectations that others have simply pale in comparison to what Jesus wishes to give to her. Submitting to that love requires leaving all other expectations behind. She cannot serve both the desires of the abuser and the desires of the One who wishes to set her free and who wishes to tell her of his love for her.<sup>69</sup>

Henri Nouwen shared this story:

Merton once told me to quit trying so hard in prayer. He said: "How does an apple ripen? It just sits in the sun." A small green apple cannot ripen in one night by tightening all its muscles, squinting its eyes and tightening its jaw in order to find itself the next morning miraculously large, red, ripe and juicy beside its small green counterparts. Like the birth of a baby or the opening of a rose, the birth of the true self takes place in God's time. We must wait for God, we must be awake; we must trust in his hidden action within us.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> A caveat is necessary here: just because a woman seeks to listen only to God's voice in regard to her abuse does not mean that her abuser has the same focus. Whenever working with a person who has been abused, it is necessary to assess for a woman's safety in her present situation.

<sup>70</sup> James Finley, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press), 119.



## CHAPTER 3

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Introduction**

The majority of Christ-followers would state that the description “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God”<sup>1</sup> points toward Christ as God. The Word as God-in-Flesh was not created and exists immutable and beyond the changes that exist within any culture that humans may create.

However, the written Word, as it is carried forward throughout history, is best utilized by being aware of its application to current culture while also setting an eye toward the context in which it was originally placed and the community to which it was originally directed. The written word must not be considered peripherally to its original context. This is important because utilizing some texts literally, within the contextualization of current North American societal norms and outside of the original cultural context, may put women who have been abused at risk of further abuse. Some of these literal interpretations may not adequately represent God’s true nature. A woman, for example, who is told that she must remain silent in church, may be receiving advice that was meant to be limited to the culture to which it was directed and to a situation that was limited to the specific church to which it had been delivered. This review considers the written Word and its use in an abused woman’s spiritual formation.

Equally important to consider is the utilization and meaning of prayer in an abused woman’s spiritual formation. Prayer ought to be considered within the framework of an appropriate and healthy relationship with God. Prayer ought not to be considered solely as a place of obligation. The Lord’s Prayer, in particular, is a prayer that has at its core grounding in submission and an acknowledgement of the human’s need for

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<sup>1</sup> John 1:1.

physical, emotional and spiritual sustenance. It seems appropriate to this evaluation to look more deeply at what this prayer may mean—and the pitfalls that might be circumvented—for believers who have survived an abusive relationship. Some topics, such as the use of “Father” in prayer, may be difficult for those who have been abused, especially if that abuse occurred at the hand of a father figure.

It will be important to consider how “reflection” on the written word and one’s relationship with Christ may be a challenge to a woman who has survived abuse. Part of the challenge for these believers may be located in an ongoing past history of what could be deemed non-reciprocity in relationships. Reflection indicates vulnerability and desire for reciprocity in one’s relationship with God. It is often hard to “bare one’s soul” when such transparency may have resulted in abuse in relationships, or may have been based in a church where “reflection” simply meant a woman receiving counsel to further submit to her abuser in order to reduce the abuse that was directed toward her. Reflection is difficult for an abuse survivor, even if reflection is upon the word given to her by the God who knows her intimately.

Lastly, it is important for women who are being abused and those who co-journey with them to have resources to use to assist in the very real concerns that are central to abuse relationships. At the end of this chapter is included a list of counseling and other related resources.

Often it is the case that topics related to submission have been moved from their central position of a relationship with God and have been relocated to language of submission surrounding interpersonal relationships. Healthy spiritual formation is all about becoming more and more like Christ, living in union with him, the Word, interacting in prayer with God and reflecting upon the relationship it entails. When that proper centrality is restored, submission is displayed, as well, in healthy interpersonal

relationships with others. This review of the literature seeks to assist in returning this language to proper submission to Christ.

### Word

It could be stated that the phrases “the Word of God and “the Word of the Lord” are at least as deeply rooted in the Christian culture as they are in Christian theology. “Word” implies action and communication. The term “Word of God” is complex and highly nuanced.”<sup>2</sup> It is this Word that is brought into a relationship with God. It is this Word that must be used well in considering the spiritual formation of those who have lived through abusive relationships.

Michael Casey, in his book *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina*, says “the Scriptures are God’s word reduced to a measure of which we are capable...we have to be bold enough to admit that the Bible, despite divine inspiration, is subject to human limitations. It cannot *comprehensively* explain or communicate the reality of God.”<sup>3</sup> And again he responds, “...we need to accept that, even though God’s word cuts like a two-edged sword (Hebrews 4:12), it is not God’s plan that the Bible be omnipotent.”<sup>4</sup>

The Word is not simply meant to be a repository to answers of life. In fact, to hold the Bible at such a vantage point removes from the viewer the truth of the relationships that it reveals, limiting its relevance to the “truths” that it contains. The written word is to depict story. Story is not something often highly esteemed by current North American society. “We live in a world impoverished of story; so it is not surprising that many of us

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<sup>2</sup> Alistair McGrath, *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 127.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina*, (Liguori, MO: Liguori/Triumph, 1996), 45.

<sup>4</sup> Casey, *Sacred Reading*, 47.

have picked up the bad habit of extracting 'truths' from the stories we read...it is no wonder that we continue this abstracting, story-mutilating practice when we read our Bibles...'Story' is not serious...so we continuously convert our stories into the 'serious' speech of information and motivation."<sup>5</sup>

God's Word is meant to be utilized with the centrality of its divine story remaining intact. "The story that is scripture, broadly conceived, is the story of following Jesus. The Christian community has always read this story as not just one story among others but as the meta-narrative that embraces, or can embrace, all stories. If we fail to recognize the capaciousness of this form, we will almost certainly end up treating our biblical text anecdotally as 'inspiration' or argumentatively as polemic."<sup>6</sup> It would be good to recall that "despite its intrinsic strength, the word of God comes to us in a very fragile condition: it is unsuitable for battering anyone."<sup>7</sup>

It is imperative to do no harm to others, especially in regard to their relationship with God. Those who travel alongside in the emotional and spiritual world of an abuse survivor must be sensitive in regard to language used to depict or explain issues of spiritual formation. This is especially true when considering important spiritual disciplines of faith and how such disciplines are depicted and presented to some Christian brothers and sisters who have endured very difficult human interactions.

For example, surrender or submission is a theme that finds itself frequently depicted in many texts related to spiritual formation:

For obedience to God's undefined will depends entirely on our passive surrender to it. We put nothing of ourselves into it apart from a general willingness that is

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<sup>5</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Eat this Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 48.

<sup>6</sup> Peterson, *Eat this Book*, 46.

<sup>7</sup> Casey, *Sacred Reading*, 44.

prepared to do anything or nothing, like a tool that, though it has no power in itself, when in the hands of the craftsman, can be used by him for any purpose within the range of its capacity and design. Whereas our obedience to the declared and defined will of God consists in the normal course of vigilance, care, attention, prudence and discretion according to how far we are helped by grace in our customary endeavors.<sup>8</sup>

J.I. Packer, in his very popular book, *Knowing God*, indicated that Christians could be known by many things but primarily by their submission to the word of God. He asks, "What is a Christian? Christians can be described from many angles, but from what we have said it is clear that we can cover everything by saying: *True Christians are people who acknowledge and live under the word of God.* They submit without reserve to the word of God...believing the teaching, trusting the promises, following the commands. Their eyes are upon the God of the Bible as their Father and the Christ of the Bible as their Savior."<sup>9</sup> Additionally Christians are people whose consciences, "like Luther's, are captive to the Word of God, and they aspire, like the psalmist, to have their whole lives brought in line with it."<sup>10</sup>

The preceding reflects appropriate truths of submission within the relationship of a Christian. Some abused individuals, however, may wrestle with the language contained within it. This is especially true for a survivor of abuse for whom life may be a sequence of submissive acts, the desired outcome to control the abuse exacted upon her by her abuser. For a survivor of abuse, especially, it is difficult to look at these concepts in any other way than giving up herself in order to escape the ire of an abusive individual. The patterns of surrender prevalent in an abusive relationship are not equivalent to submission that is depicted in a Christian's relationship with Christ. Those

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<sup>8</sup> Jean-Pierre DeCausade, *The Sacrament of the Present Moment* (New York: Harper Collins, 1989), 25.

<sup>9</sup> J I Packer, *Knowing God*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 116.

<sup>10</sup> Packer, *Knowing God*, 116.

individuals who may teach on issues of submission in the Christian life must be careful to provide this distinction. It is necessary to think through what God may have desired future believers to understand, both intellectually and emotionally, as a result of interaction with the written message to humanity.

“When we come to the Bible with the mind only and not the heart, we separate the written word from the revealed Word—Jesus Christ. This is the failure of Biblicism, a form of faith in the Bible alone that leads to dangerous and harsh consequences. It is also the failure of radical secularism, a willful refusal to bracket out presuppositions and engage the Bible on its own terms.”<sup>11</sup> This is utilization of the written word with no ear toward its original context, purpose or culture.

It might be helpful while thinking of contextualization of the Word to consider the viewpoint of a person who was raised as a child of missionary parents in Israel. Besides speaking Hebrew fluently, she has the vantage point of the written Word that is immersed in a culture that existed in the environs of the Bible. Her sensitivities toward the written Word are less based in North American culture than might be the case by some other North American believers. Psalm 23 is a good example. Where someone raised in Central Massachusetts, for example, might read about lying down in green pastures and have a mental image that includes the rolling hills and maple trees of a small, New England community, the woman raised in Israel has a response to the text seemingly more related to the original intention of the psalmist. It is so because she has lived viewing a similar terrain as had the author of the psalm.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Foster, *Life with God: Reading the Bible for Spiritual Transformation* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 72.

<sup>12</sup> Conversation with Shiri Messina, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, South Hamilton, MA, October 21, 2009.

This missionary has a clear vantage point of the incongruity with which North Americans may consider these texts. "We must understand that the Bible is an ancient text, and the unfamiliarity of its people, places and events to contemporary eyes make it seem far removed from our everyday experience. It takes effort to enter this strange...world of the Bible. For example, the...teaching of 'life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot' is often cited out of context to support capital punishment. However...we find that the ancient cultures surrounding Israel practiced retaliation, which involved escalating violence."<sup>13</sup> It is necessary to consider all scripture in its rightful context.

It is also good to recall that "the Bible's central Story is about relationship, and so for guidance in following Jesus it gives us not a book of morals or seven steps to self-help, but a slew of letters. They flow between people charged with spreading the Gospel—specific people with specific struggles."<sup>14</sup> Scripture, then, ought not to be used as a series of proof texts to dismiss, or even eliminate, the source of an individual's pain. It should not be used as a means to force behavioral standards toward one's interpretation of scripture. Scripture is representative of the Word that it holds up and of the life that Christ desires to transform within his believers. It elucidates the spiritual formation that occurs within a believer who allows God to continue to change her. Healthy spiritual formation, then, is all about becoming more and more like Christ, the Word.

It is true that "we can say, in a preliminary manner, that spiritual formation for the Christian basically refers to the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the

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<sup>13</sup> Foster, *Life with God*, 81.

<sup>14</sup> Foster, *Life with God*, 85.

human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself.”<sup>15</sup>

Equally important is the reality that being spiritually formed “is the process of transforming the inner reality of the self...in such a way that the overall life with God naturally and freely comes to pass in us. Our inner world (the secret heart) becomes the home of Jesus, by his initiative and our response.”<sup>16</sup>

All individuals have some form of spiritual formation. “To be alive is to be in relationship with God and in the process of spiritual formation. Each is unavoidable given breath and consciousness. But all formation is not good formation...”<sup>17</sup> Those who have been abused live within a paradigm of submission that often runs counter to the Christian God’s desire for the wellbeing of an individual and counter to what the Christian God would deem as appropriate in terms of the interactions of humans in community.

It is necessary to note that “spiritual formation, good or bad, is always profoundly social. You cannot keep it to yourself. Anyone who thinks of it as a merely private matter has misunderstood it.”<sup>18</sup> Thelma Hall in *Too Deep for Words* indicates that the purpose for spiritual leaders is not to simply improve the inner landscape of the emotional and spiritual lives of themselves or others who may come under their spiritual care. “To see

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<sup>15</sup> Dallas Willard, *Renovations of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 22.

<sup>16</sup> Foster, *Life with God*, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Gary W. Moon, “Spiritual Direction: Meaning, Purpose, and Implications for Mental Health Professionals,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* Vol. 30, No. 4 (2002): 266.

<sup>18</sup> Willard, *Renovations of the Heart*, 182.



every woman and every man as sister and brother is to participate in the faith vision of the mystic, whose central intuition in the unity and oneness of ALL, in God.” (sic)<sup>19</sup>

A life that is spiritually disciplined is a life that is based in the recognition that a person is loved by God. Because of this love relationship, she is able to consider not simply her needs, but also the needs of others. She will learn to interact appropriately with others. It is necessary to help survivors of abuse to apply that love of God to her interpersonal relationships; otherwise it is easy to default to becoming a person who becomes focused solely in the good feelings that might accompany a reflective relationship with God. A relationship with God ought not to be a solipsistic one. Instead, “to be a contemplative therefore is not limited to any specific lifestyle, such as monastic or religious; rather, it has everything to do with hearing God’s call *to become love*, in whatever state of life we find ourselves. For contemplation will make us no less concerned for the world we live in, but more.”<sup>20</sup>

The concern for the world will necessitate that a co-journeyer be aware of the cultural interpretations of the Word that are held by an abuse survivor. Both translation and history color the perception of any term that relates to spiritual formation. A person without a history of abuse does not have the same grasp on or view of the text as does a person who has such a history. It is important to keep these things in mind when providing assistance and direction in the spiritual formation of others.

It is the co-journeyer’s responsibility to point a woman who has endured abuse back to the Voice of the one who loves her. Henri Nouwen shared that he struggled with voices, “voices that are loud, full of promises and very seductive. Those voices say, “Go

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<sup>19</sup> Thelma Hall, *Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina* (Wahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988), 55.

<sup>20</sup> Hall, *Too Deep for Words*, 53.

out and prove that you are worth something... [these voices] suggest that I am not going to be loved without my having earned it...they deny loudly that love is a totally free gift. I leave home every time I lose faith in the voice that calls me the Beloved..."<sup>21</sup>

In contrast, he reports that the voice of good spiritual formation is "the never-interrupted voice of life speaking from eternity and giving life and love whenever it is heard."<sup>22</sup> In that voice he is able to hear himself "as the Beloved of my heavenly Father."

[The Voice] is the never-interrupted voice of life speaking from eternity and giving life and love whenever it is heard. When I hear that voice, I know that I am home with God, and have nothing to fear. As the Beloved of my heavenly Father, "I can walk in the valley of darkness: no evil would I fear." As the Beloved, I can "cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out devils." Having "received without charge," I can "give without charge." As the Beloved, I can confront, console, admonish, and encourage without fear of rejection or need for affirmation. As the Beloved, I can suffer persecution without desire for revenge and receive praise without using it as a proof of my goodness. As the Beloved, I can be tortured and killed without ever having to doubt that the love that is given to me is stronger than death. As the Beloved, I am free to live and give life, free also to die while giving life.<sup>23</sup>

One learns to listen to the "Voice" identified by Henri Nouwen also by becoming closer and closer in a relationship with the God of that voice. This occurs by engaging in disciplines that help such a relationship to be born, to "take the smallest step toward [the goodness of God] [and] it will come rushing in."<sup>24</sup> These disciplines are not meant to be one more task to complete; rather, "they are embedded in the texture of everyday life. If we walk through our day in sensitivity to 'Divine Breathings' we will receive guidance in practicing them—spontaneously, gratuitously."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Henri Nouwen *Return of the Prodigal Son* (New York: Image, 1992), 40.

<sup>22</sup> Nouwen, *Prodigal Son*, 39.

<sup>23</sup> Nouwen, *Prodigal Son*, 39.

<sup>24</sup> Foster, *Life with God*, 172.

<sup>25</sup> Nouwen, *Prodigal Son*, 40.

Submission, then, is to offer oneself to God as a gift. It is through the study of God's word, where study occurs in ways that take into account the emotional, spiritual and cultural state of the soul of a survivor of abuse, that one can begin to let go of the need to hold on to messages and understandings of the past and begin to learn to pray in ways that are meaningful and purposeful to the relationship of believer and God.

### **Prayer**

Considering prayer and the challenges for abuse survivors in terms of the intimate relationship with God may be well understood, it would seem, by reviewing the prayer that Jesus taught to his disciples to pray. This review will build upon some of the topics already discussed in previous chapters. Jesus taught his disciples to pray matter-of-factly. Jesus taught his disciples to pray "to the point" and not in a roundabout manner; as if God will be impressed by a person's many words. Jesus' prayer has, at its core, the need for submission to the God who is revealed in language of relationship.

#### Our Father in Heaven (Trust in the Relationship)

God is not a Force residing somewhere in the universe, capriciously giving and retaining gifts as it wills. In fact, "God has a name. He reveals himself with a name: Yahweh. The name enters our story and reveals the being of God with us, continuously, as he calls our names—Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Mary, Peter... God has a name."<sup>26</sup> And, that God cares about people.

Often the "God who has a name" initially looks suspiciously like one's parents. There is, perhaps, good reason for this. The first people to give love and to exist in a position of authority are one's parents. Additionally, the first people who provide some sense of a person's identity are her parents. A loving parent may help a person to begin

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<sup>26</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Tell it Slant: A Conversation on the Language of Jesus in His Stories and Prayers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 171.

to have an understanding of a Loving God. Jesus' favorite name for God, based upon the number of times it was used,<sup>27</sup> seemed to be that of "Father." In fact, like Jesus, one may "allow [oneself] to be gathered up into the arms of the Father and let him sing his love song over [her]."<sup>28</sup>

However, it must be reiterated that there may be many challenges with the title "Father" for survivors of abuse. If abuse has occurred at the hand of those who are in positions of authority, allowing or being comfortable with others in places of authority is often quite difficult. As stated previously, if a survivor has been abused at the hand of his or her parent, names for God that are couched in human relationship may feel painful. If a survivor has experienced abuse by his or her priest or other ministerial person as has been an unfortunate occurrence within the life of the church, the very name "Father" may be emotionally terrorizing.

It is especially crucial for those who journey with those who have had punitive parents to bring to the forefront the fact that God is not a God who is looking to punish every small thing that a person does. Such thinking is counter to the gospel of Christ and risks being idolatry<sup>29</sup> if those thoughts are disseminated to women who have suffered abuse. After all, "God wishes to have a relationship with human beings. Innocent though he was, he hung upon the Cross as a sinner, his heart broken with love and sorrow. Love is the only salve for wounded love."<sup>30</sup> It is this salve of love that must be brought to the forefront for those recovering from the hurt of "abusive love."

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<sup>27</sup> It is interesting to note that in the New Testament, God is referred to as "Father" around 245 times.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1992), 4.

<sup>29</sup> In that such an image may be held up as a "god" in the life of a believer.

<sup>30</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Essence of Prayer* (Mahwah, NJ: HiddenSpring, 2006), 63.

If a spiritual leader wishes to apply this “salve of love” to another’s soul, it is necessary to be concerned about the spiritual and emotional well-being of the people who may be under his or her care. As regards abuse survivors, one must be concerned about how words used to address God may impact abuse survivors’ ongoing spiritual formation. Central to this is the fact that pedagogical and therapeutic concerns and proper spiritual direction ought to “challenge those involved in Christian formation to promote the well-being of the entire kingdom of God—female and male, adults and children, black and white, rich and poor.”<sup>31</sup> Awareness of the context of an abuse survivor is integral to proper spiritual care.

In this regard, it would seem important to stress that Jesus was not implying that humans ought to address God as a masculine Entity. Using the metaphor of “Parent” is, as stated by Peterson, “a language strategy to defend against the subtle but insidious depersonalization of prayer that pervades the human condition.”<sup>32</sup> “Likewise, “Father” as a metaphor names a person, not an object. Father and son and daughter are not functions. They are unique blood relationships.”<sup>33</sup>

Additionally, “Jesus’ use of ‘Abba praying’ was an inclusive action. By the use of the diminutive for “father,” Jesus reveals that a believer’s relationship with God involves not only “the strength and empowerment commonly identified with masculinity, but also the nurturing and caring intimacy often associated with femininity.”<sup>34</sup> It is also true that

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<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, S. Steve Kang, Gary a. Parrett, *A Many Colored Kingdom: Multicultural Dynamics for Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2004), 94.

<sup>32</sup> Peterson, *Tell it Slant*, 169.

<sup>33</sup> Peterson, *Tell It Slant*, 169.

<sup>34</sup> Foster, *Prayer*, xii.

“Jesus deepens our sense of the personal in prayer by using the terms “Father” and “friend.”<sup>35</sup>

In a sense, Jesus’ assertion that humanity know God as “Father,” “Parent”—those relationships that may be understood through the common denominator of blood relationships—is pivotal to an understanding of God as a relational Being. It is additionally pivotal in understanding that prayer “is to walk in the full light of God and to say simply, without holding back, ‘I am human and you are God.’ At that moment, conversion occurs, the restoration of the true relationship. A human being is not someone who once in a while makes a mistake, and God is not someone who now and then forgives. No! Human beings are sinners and God is love...this conversion brings with it the relaxation which lets you breathe again and puts you at rest in the embrace of a forgiving God.”<sup>36</sup>

It could be said that “prayer is not a pious interlude; it necessarily permeates life at all times and places.”<sup>37</sup> It is trust in the transforming Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ that allows a person to interact with God in prayer. Without this, true prayer and true relationship does not occur. Prayer without the Holy Spirit’s presence becomes, at least for the survivor, yet another place where Something must be placated in order for survival to occur.

God speaks with humans at the very core of their being and reveals their identity to them. Through the relationship healing occurs. The belovedness of humanity is only known in relationship—“Our Father in Heaven.” Henri Nouwen opines that Jesus’ core

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<sup>35</sup> Peterson, *Tell It Slant*, 51.

<sup>36</sup> Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Only Necessary Thing: Living a Prayerful Life*, ed. Wendy Wilson Greer (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), 158.

<sup>37</sup> Peterson, *Tell it Slant*, 123.

moment in public life was his baptism in the Jordan “when Jesus heard the affirmation, ‘You are my beloved on whom my favor rests...The temptations in the desert are temptations to move him away from that spiritual identity. He was tempted to believe he was someone else: *You are the one who can turn stone into bread. You are the one who can jump from the temple. You are the one who can make others bow to your power.* Jesus said, ‘No, no, no. I am the Beloved from God.’...”<sup>38</sup> Prayer, then, becomes listening to the Voice who calls one “beloved.”

### May Your Name Be Kept Holy

At the root of Jesus’ awareness that he was the Beloved of God was the truth that God is Holy. The word often translated “hallow” in the prayer that he taught to his disciples is defined as “holy, consecrated, sacred or revered.”<sup>39</sup> At least one understanding of this part of Jesus’ prayer was for his followers to allow God—the one now known as their Heavenly Parent—to have the position of authority in their lives.

Abused individuals typically allow their family of origin patterns and expectations to be in the position of authority in their lives. In some respects, such patterns and expectations become “holy” and God becomes second-place to those things. Reversing this to a proper ordering is a challenge in terms of the spiritual formation of these persons.

Houston speaks to this area of human nature “When I was a child, I worshiped my parents and Santa Claus. I didn’t bow before them and offer sacrifices..., but deep

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<sup>38</sup> Nouwen, *The Only Necessary Thing*, 67.

<sup>39</sup> Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online, s.v. “Holy,” <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/holy>, (accessed June 10, 2009).

inside I was aware that my parents held total authority over my life and that Santa, who knew whether I had been bad or good, gave me great gifts if I was good.”<sup>40</sup>

Houston’s thoughts provide a glimpse into the manner in which humans often attempt to direct God’s view of them. Goodness is measured by the good things done. Badness by the number of bad things done. Humans remain in control of God by reducing God to a heavenly calculator, who is busily transacting business with some great logarithm of salvation. Prayer would, by necessity, fit into the same category. If one does not pray in the proper manner, time, space, and with the appropriate number of words, one will remain “bad” before the eyes of God.

This is strikingly counter to the thought that “what I mean by passivity is the attitude of heart and mind (an attitude that cannot just come of itself but must be conscientiously cultivated) that remains always on the receiving end in the divine relationship. It means a practical, not merely notional, grasp that our God is incessantly on offer, always there, waiting to be taken in and received.”<sup>41</sup>

This does not mean that awareness of God’s personal relationship to humans should take away a level of respect and awe that ought to occur in the awareness that God is holy. According to Peterson, “There is, to be sure, a childlike intimacy and delight in the use of “Abba.”<sup>42</sup> He goes on to say, “But the word also continues to carry an element of awe and respect and reverence. I don’t cease to be a child in the presence of

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<sup>40</sup> James M. Houston, *The Transforming Power of Prayer: Deepening Your Friendship with God* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1996), 39.

<sup>41</sup> Burrows, *Essence*, 201.

<sup>42</sup> Peterson, *Tell it Slant*, 53.



my father... Intimacy does not preclude reverence. True intimacy does not eliminate a sacred awe: otherness, Otherness."<sup>43</sup>

The revelatory nature of God's essence supersedes, as well, all cultural differences. A caution is necessary here: while God indeed supersedes these differences, those journeying with abuse survivors must not cast out dissimilarities that exist culturally, especially in the arena of childhood abusive parental patterns versus caring ones. Such differences often create different viewpoints for evaluating God's presence in one's life. For example, Kang states in regard to theology, "black theologians and white theologians have different grids, and these different mental grids determine the sources and the method each theologian uses in the construction of theological statements."<sup>44</sup>

The truth remains, however, that for the person desiring to pray and desiring to keep in mind God's holiness, it is helpful to note that God's nature is consistent. Regardless of culture and background, "we can receive his revelation of himself in [this era], even though it was first recorded in the language of the seventh century B.C.E. or the first century C.E. Just as God revealed himself to be compassionate and gracious to the Hebrew people, and just as he revealed himself in a manger and on a cross and by an empty tomb, so he makes himself known to us every time we bow before his Word."<sup>45</sup>

God's holiness requires that God be center stage. Prayer provides a place to allow this to occur. Through Sabbath, silence, contemplation and other forms of prayer, people begin to realize that they are not the center of the universe. And while Jesus came to save humankind, he is with us always, "not so as to pillow our weary heads on

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<sup>43</sup> Peterson, *Tell it Slant*, 53.

<sup>44</sup> Conde-Frazier, *Many Colored Kingdom*, 90.

<sup>45</sup> Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, 157.

his breast and continually murmur words of solace in our ears"<sup>46</sup>, but rather to "grow up" followers by "sharing with us his vision, his passionate dedication to the Father's will. He is with us to brace, reinforce, underpin us for our life's great task."<sup>47</sup> God is not there to set any person on the throne of his or her life. Rather, God seemingly desires for people to slow down, to let God be the center.

Prayer does not exist as an "emotional fix." It is not a way to "get what I want" because of the relationship. Prayer is relationship. Merton puts it well when he states "Only when we are able to 'let go' of everything within us, all desire to see, to know, to taste and experience the presence of God, do we truly become able to experience that presence with the overwhelming conviction and reality that revolutionize our entire life."<sup>48</sup>

May Your Kingdom Come and What You Want Be Done Here on Earth as It Is in Heaven

Trusting that God's authority is good authority can be difficult. To pray this and to mean this necessitates that the person speaking or thinking the words will allow God to have control over all things. It means believing that "prayer is a shared life with God over a lifetime."<sup>49</sup> Prayer is not a contract that states "if I pray thus, God must give me this in return." Rather, "because prayer is a shared life with God, we must relinquish the idea that our prayer is our own to control as we wish."<sup>50</sup> This seems to run counter to the

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<sup>46</sup> Burrows, *Essence*, 17.

<sup>47</sup> Burrows, *Essence*, 17.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1971), 89.

<sup>49</sup> Roberta C. Bondi, *To Pray and to Love: Conversations on Prayer with the Early Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 72.

<sup>50</sup> Bondi, *To Pray and to Love*, 72.

human's desire for control. It does not seem logical, perhaps, that it is "love alone that can reach God in this life, and not [human] knowing."<sup>51</sup>

Control that may seem of great merit may creep into a person's "prayer time." One may, for example, resemble a prayer warrior, seemingly always receiving answers to one's prayers. As Jan Johnson recounts from her own life experience, "my quiet time in those days was crisp and thorough, tight and structured...in spite of my spiritual whiz-kid persona, I was crumbling and raging inside."<sup>52</sup> After a significant change in her life, she began "experiment[ing] with unpretentious, plain-speaking conversation with God...God was not squinting down at me from His Supreme Court chair waiting to see if I mentioned every name on my request list. He was sitting next to me on the backyard swing, eager to hear me, waiting me out, offering me clues."<sup>53</sup>

God wishes believers to notice that God is "sitting beside them on the backyard swing." God wishes an intimate relationship, not one based in control. As states Burrows, "only those who were humble and open, prepared to accept God as he chose to come, prepared to believe that he could come in strange ways; those who let him be God and did not insist on being God themselves...[those] whose need was great, the sinners, the wretched..."<sup>54</sup> Those who will, through "prayer, reading, meditation and all the activities of...life...aimed at purity of heart, an unconditional and totally humble surrender to God, a total acceptance of ourselves and of our situation as willed by

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<sup>51</sup> Emilie Griffin, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing* (New York: HarperCollins, 1981), 27.

<sup>52</sup> Jan Johnson, *Enjoying the Presence of God: Discovering Intimacy with God in the Daily Rhythms of Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1996), 8.

<sup>53</sup> Johnson, *Enjoying the Presence of God*, 10.

<sup>54</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer* (Denville, NJ: Dimensions Books, 1980), 59.

him."<sup>55</sup> The prayer relationship will allow God to become first; to hold the place of holiness in a person's life.

Praying in the spirit of Jesus' model prayer requires that the person praying will be able to state, "'thy will be done.' Unless that be the spirit of all our prayer, how should we have courage to pray if we know ourselves at all, or if we have come to a time when we have some retrospect on our prayers and their fate? Without this committal to the wisdom of God, prayer would be a very dangerous weapon in proportion as it was effective. No true God could promise us an answer to our every prayer...the rain that saved my crop might ruin my neighbour's."<sup>56</sup> The truth remains that if God were to answer every request made by human beings, "God would in effect abdicate, turning the world over to us to run." <sup>57</sup>

Prayer, then, may go unanswered, at least in the viewpoint of the one praying. It will not do to "rush too quickly here to solve this problem with glib talk about God answering with 'yes, no, or wait' and the like...we must all admit to deep perplexity over these things."<sup>58</sup>

Such perplexity could be a detriment to one's spiritual formation, and to the relationship that is built through prayer, if accusatory statements are made by well-meaning Christian guides. Statements such as 'God always answers prayer, but sometimes 'No' is the answer,'<sup>59</sup> might yield the belief that somehow that person's

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<sup>55</sup> Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 68.

<sup>56</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *The Soul of Prayer* (London: The Epworth Press, 1916), 38.

<sup>57</sup> Philip Yancey, *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 228.

<sup>58</sup> Foster, *Prayer, Heart's True Home*, 181.

<sup>59</sup> Yancey, *Prayer*, 220.

prayers are deficient. God is holy. God has the bigger picture in mind. But gentle treading is important in the terrain of another's pain. Abuse that may have lasted for years may certainly garner at least the recollection that "I cried out every night for God's help, to make it stop...God never answered."<sup>60</sup> One who is concerned about another's prayer life or sense of spiritual formation must not exclude this very real quandary from the person's relationship with God.

Perhaps it may encourage the survivor to know that "we have a Savior who, in the darkness of Gethsemane, shouldered the weight of unanswered prayer and who, in his moment of greatest agony, shared our confused question: 'Why?'"<sup>61</sup>

#### Give Us the Nourishment We Need for Each Day

Abuse survivors have often been placed in the role of "parentification." This term simply means that the roles have been reversed. A child who has suffered at the hands of a parent or other authority figure may become, at least emotionally, the "parent" of the abuser. Hypervigilance causes one to seek for the emotional, physical and, perhaps, spiritual needs of the authority figure. This happens to provide safety to the survivor.

It becomes difficult for the survivor to allow others to provide any sort of resources to them. This is regardless of the assertion made by Evan Howard, "We learn petition and intercession as children. Children are used to asking for what they need. There is nothing more spontaneous than a cry for help."<sup>62</sup> This is a true statement, at least at some level. But if asked, those whose abuse came from families of origin might respond that they learned how to do it alone. Asking—especially if emotional, spiritual or

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<sup>60</sup> Yancey, *Prayer*, 216.

<sup>61</sup> Foster, *Prayer, Heart's True Home*, 184.

<sup>62</sup> Evan Howard, *Praying the Scriptures: A Field Guide for Your Spiritual Journey* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 55.

physical resources seemed inadequate—was tantamount to breaking a family rule and placing oneself in an insufferable position. It, perhaps, now seems “wrong” to bring petty things before God’s throne of grace. For the Christian who is recovering from issues of abuse, awareness that God is not like an abusive family member may take some time and may feel risky. But it is necessary.

While present-day Christians may consider symbolically Jesus’ thoughts, Jesus, in his model prayer, was in part certainly extending very literal prayers for tangible sustenance for each day. In the present-day, white collar demographic of American culture, the availability of “our daily bread” is not frequently a concern. For these, the local grocery store is well-stocked with whatever is necessary. Both rich and poor, however, now seemingly come from various ethnicities. That very diversity is “increased by economic and power disparities that create inequalities and injustices at every level.”<sup>63</sup> Going hungry may be a larger American issue than modern day Christians may be keen to think. It would behoove Christians to keep such things in mind, especially those who work with others in need.

At any rate, whether one’s financial well-being is taken into account or not, there is at least implied within this an invitation to live without anxiety. The invitation is to allow God to provide for today, rather than borrowing from tomorrow what has not yet happened. Allowing God to provide is an important element for Christians.

The writer of *The Cloud of Unknowing* provides the following thought in regard to God’s provision. “For if you, whoever you are, have been sincerely converted from the world to God, you must trust steadfastly that God will give you, without your attending to

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<sup>63</sup> Conde-Nash, *A Many-Colored Kingdom*, 53.

it, one of two things: either an abundance of what is necessary or strength in body and spiritual patience to put up with the lack of them.”<sup>64</sup>

Praying this part of Jesus’ prayer does imply that the person praying will accept that what God gives is adequate for the day. “It does not necessarily mean that the desire for sirloin steak will be the provision for the day, even though it is important to tell God what is explicitly on our minds, whether it is deemed suitable or not.”<sup>65</sup> It might mean that bread truly is the sustenance needed. The importance here is to allow God to provide. “No longer do we take things into our hands. Rather, we place all things into divine hands and then act out of inner promptings.”<sup>66</sup>

For a person desiring release from her painful memories of abuse, praying that God will wipe her memory clean and heal her might be the focus of prayer. God’s “provision for the day” may mean something other than this. It might mean gaining God’s understanding of her as God’s beloved in the midst of the troubling memories. At any rate, “[the person] must learn trust in a heavenly Father who loves to give.”<sup>67</sup> She must “always bear in mind that first and last, prayer is a pursuit of the God who has promised us God’s own self, not just for the time of prayer, but always.”<sup>68</sup>

It is this aspect that may be difficult for a survivor of abuse to grasp. And while it is certainly sin—missing the mark—to have a relationship with anyone or with God stay at a superficial level, it is that level that is often seen as safe. Exposure to deeper issues in prayer—such as those of sin—may seem quite challenging.

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<sup>64</sup> Griffin, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 59.

<sup>65</sup> Bondi, *To Pray and to Love*, 67.

<sup>66</sup> Foster, *Prayer, Heart’s True Home*, 95.

<sup>67</sup> Foster, *Prayer, Heart’s True Home*, 95.

<sup>68</sup> Bondi, *To Pray and to Love*, 53.

### Forgive Us Our Sins Just as We Have Forgiven Those Who Have Sinned Against Us

Issues of forgiveness are, perhaps, one of the most difficult areas of prayer for Christian abuse survivors. To be able to ask that God would “forgive those who trespass against us” is not a simple prayer for an abuse survivor. In actuality, this prayer, if it is to be genuine, “means actually and genuinely longing for the welfare of the person who has committed the injury. Forgiveness includes desiring the wholeness of the injurer.”<sup>69</sup> Those who would minister to others in this area of spiritual formation would do well to not dismiss the challenges that lie beneath true prayer of those words. Again, the process of prayer comes back to trust. Trust that forgiveness has been extended to the pray-er, and that, in that state of forgiveness, he or she can (and must) pray for the state of the one who has been the abuser.

Forgiveness is not necessarily forgiveness if it is circumvented. “The beginning of forgiveness may be months or even years of asking God for help in even wanting [the abuser’s] well-being, but that desire will finally come. The ability to forgive is finally a gift of God’s grace.”<sup>70</sup> Forgiveness implies that the person understands the depths of the transgressions that the other person has exacted against him or herself and is willing, with God’s help, to let go of the pain associated with such trespasses. Henri Nouwen states well the meaning of forgiveness. “Forgiveness means that I continually am willing to forgive the other person for not being God—for not fulfilling all my needs. I, too, must ask forgiveness for not being able to fulfill other people’s needs.”<sup>71</sup>

This may be a difficult concept for an abuse survivor to relate to herself. After all, it has perhaps seemed that the survivor is not culpable of such things. She has

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<sup>69</sup> Bondi, *To Pray and to Love*, 114.

<sup>70</sup> Bondi, *To Pray and to Love*, 116.

<sup>71</sup> Nouwen, *The Only Necessary Thing*, 150.



sacrificed herself in order to “make right” a difficult relationship, after all. It will take some time for such individuals to realize that, by limiting communication in such a way, manipulation of the relationship, however well-intentioned, has taken place.

Additionally, the survivor may have expected more from the other person than what he or she can give. Humans cannot extend to each other the same behavior of God. “Human beings, whether it’s your husband, or your wife, or your father, or your mother, your brother, sister, or child, are all so limited in giving that which we crave. But since we want so much and we get only part of what we want, we have to keep on forgiving people for not giving us all we want.”<sup>72</sup> A survivor who forgives is also on a road to her own recovery from her abuse.

Forgiveness is a powerful place of healing for a person who has been a victim of abuse. Christa Sands, in the book that depicts her own personal healing from abuse, stated that her whole existence felt based in the memory of the abuse inflicted upon her by a family friend. She recounts, “My emotional, mental and spiritual ‘equilibrium’ wobbled so much that I thought I would never get straightened out. I lost hope...yet something stirred deep within me, something that made me determined not to give up and stay in bondage to this man forever.”<sup>73</sup> Forgiveness is a place where these bondages may be broken.

It is difficult to forgive others, especially when abuse has occurred. However, it is important to keep in mind that “forgiving is the only way [for an abuse survivor] to be fair to herself—not forgiving causes oneself to remain in the place of being hurt for the rest

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<sup>72</sup> Nouwen, *The Only Necessary Thing*, 150.

<sup>73</sup> Christa Sands, *Learning to Trust Again: A Young Woman’s Journey of Healing from Sexual Abuse* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers, 1999), 26.

of her life.”<sup>74</sup> It is necessary to remember that forgiveness of wrong should not cause the person forgiving to be equivalent to a “doormat.” Forgiveness does not mean that one tolerates bad behavior. In fact, if a survivor of abuse uses Jesus’ example of forgiveness, there is a sense that one is to “forgive those who wrong you, but do not tolerate their wrong-doing.” This can be seen in Jesus’ forgiveness of the woman caught in adultery. His statement to her indicated forgiveness. It also indicated a sense of responsibility. “Go now and sin no more.”<sup>75</sup>

Forgiveness of others also does not automatically mean that the person ought to be trusted or that a relationship ought to be resumed. “Suppose [the abuser] was your husband once and that he beat you or betrayed you until you just could not put up with it anymore and you left him...forgive him and pray that he will be changed.” One does not have to go back. “Remember: You may be a forgiver, but forgivers do not have to be fools.”<sup>76</sup>

It is equally as important for an abuse survivor to hear that forgiveness is often a process. In fact, “when we pressure victims to let go of the anger quickly and forgive the perpetrator, we don’t realize that premature forgiveness can actually hinder the healing process.”<sup>77</sup>

Lastly, while it might feel good to hear “I am sorry” come from the one that has been abusive, it is not helpful to wait for those words before one forgives. “If you wait, you may have to wait forever. Why put your forgiveness in the hands of the person who

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<sup>74</sup> Lewis Smedes, “Five Things Everyone Should Know about Forgiving,” Messages by Lewis Smedes, First Air Date October 5, 1997, [http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/smedes\\_4101.htm](http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/smedes_4101.htm) (accessed March 1, 2012).

<sup>75</sup> John 8:11b.

<sup>76</sup> Smedes, “Five Things Everyone Should Know about Forgiving.”

<sup>77</sup> Christa Sands, *Learning to Trust Again*, 9.

made you unhappy in the first place?"<sup>78</sup> Redemption of submission in terms of interpersonal relationships bears in mind the fact that one cannot control another person's desires, thoughts, words, or actions. While hard, forgiveness exists not solely for the person who has exacted the bad behavior. It is equally as important for the person who has been abused; surrendering the need to hold on to that is a means toward healing of herself and perhaps healing of her abuser.

On the other hand, an abuse survivor may believe he or she is not "worthy" of forgiveness. Shame is at the core of such thinking. This certainly would impact prayer and relationships with others. Learning to pray as the tax collector prayed, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner," is a necessity. "Refusing [God's forgiveness] will ultimately lose us our personhood unless we are brought back to our senses."<sup>79</sup> Allowing God to heal that is difficult. "We think that if we are not loved, it must be because we did not earn it. The truth is, we can't earn love. It is just something that someone decides to feel toward us."<sup>80</sup> Retaining a sense of shame often makes sense to someone who has been abused. There has often been a sense of being accused of being "less" than what she ought to be in order to be a person who is worthy of being loved, "We don't deserve it...deserving and love are unrelated."<sup>81</sup> God desires to heal that inner space that believes love must be earned. God desires to save a woman who has been a victim of abuse from an image that is based in others' "evil" toward her.

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<sup>78</sup> Smedes, "Five Things Everyone Should Know about Forgiving."

<sup>79</sup> Houston, *Transforming Power of Prayer*, 187.

<sup>80</sup> Henry Cloud, *Changes that Heal: How to Understand Your Past to Ensure a Healthier Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 71.

<sup>81</sup> Cloud, *Changes that Heal*, 71.

And Do Not Cause Us to Be Tempted, but Save Us from the Evil One

The Lord's Prayer, then, is a prayer which indicates that humankind is vulnerable. The human has physical needs and will have challenges in daily interactions. The human being is, also, very apt to want to travel in places where danger may lurk. Prayer may also be one of those places.

It seems important, in terms of spiritual formation and prayer, to be reminded of the reality that "God the Spirit is interpreting our sighs and groans before the throne of heaven. And God the Father, who sits upon the throne of heaven, is using our prayers to form a perfect soliloquy—God speaking to God."<sup>82</sup>

This thought of "soliloquy" is also echoed by Forsyth. "He who speaks to us also hears in us, because he opens our inward ear (Romans 8:15, Galatians 4:6). And yet he is Another, who so fully lives in us as to give us but the more fully to ourselves. So that our prayer is a soliloquy with God, a monologue a deux."<sup>83</sup> God has a vested interest in providing for protection of believers.

But God does not necessary remove temptation from human's life. "Temptation is also a process of testing by God... [God's] testing helps us to mature through our suffering and temptation...bringing us to maturity."<sup>84</sup> A survivor of abuse may be tempted in many ways. She may be tempted to interact with God in a way that is reminiscent of her interactions with people from her formative years. She may believe that dysfunctional "family rules" are holy and can replace God's beliefs about her. She may believe that she is to provide for herself. She may believe that she cannot or ought not to forgive others. She may believe that healing will never come, regardless of the

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<sup>82</sup> Foster, *Prayer, Heart's True Home*, 100.

<sup>83</sup> Forsyth, *Soul of Prayer*, 64.

<sup>84</sup> Houston, *Transforming Power of Prayer*, 188.

relationship with God that is developing through prayer. Henri Nouwen speaks to this challenge:

Healing begins not where our pain is taken away, but where it can be shared and seen as part of a larger pain. The first task of healing, therefore, is to take our many problems and pains out of their isolation and place them at the center of the great battle against the Evil One...As we create the space to mourn—whether through one-to-one relationships, small support groups, or communal celebrations—we free ourselves little by little from the grip of the Evil One and come to discover in the midst of our grief that the same Spirit who calls us to mourn stirs us to make the first movement in our dance with God...<sup>85</sup>  
Humanity desires to often create its own God, to worship its own image. A

relationship with God that is based in the attitude of the Lord's Prayer seeks to undo that desire and replace it with a Relationship that is much higher and much greater than all relationships that exist within the human realm. Those who will travel with abuse survivors in the area of spiritual formation and reflection upon the relationship with God will do well to keep all these things in mind.

For God's is the Kingdom and Power and glory, forever and ever. Amen.

### **Reflection**

Prayer is a pilgrimage into the intimacies of a love relationship with God.

—Stephen A. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Disciple*

Jesus took time for quiet and reflection. And, like Jesus, believers must find time and space to engage in reflection upon Word and upon one's prayer. The spiritual life is one that is based upon times of quiet and space and the interaction with scripture, prayer and the Holy Spirit. Someone who lives in such a manner "is not one who takes his prayer seriously, but one who takes God seriously, who is famished for truth, who

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<sup>85</sup> Nouwen, *The Only Necessary Thing*, 151.

seeks to live in generous simplicity, in the spirit.”<sup>86</sup> Because of that, rhythm of silence must be an integral part of a believer’s life.

This rhythm of silence and what one often “hears” in the midst of it is important. Providing the space for silence often leads to growth: the Christian life ought not to remain at the place of conversion. This is in spite of the fact that in some Christian circles the sentiment exists that “everything is made to center upon the initial act of ‘accepting’ Christ...and we are not expected thereafter to crave any further revelation of God to our souls. We have been snared in the coils of a spurious logic which insists that if we have found him, we need no more seek him.”<sup>87</sup> The truth is that through one’s seeking of God, God continues to help that person grow to become more and more like Christ over the process of his or her life.

This seeking requires the desire to set aside a personal agenda in regard to interaction with God. It requires that a believer would listen to “the Holy Spirit within us, and...bring our hearts into harmony with his voice, so that we allow the Holy Spirit to speak and pray within us, and lend him our voices and our affections that we may become, as far as possible, conscious of his prayer in our hearts. This implies a difficult and constant attention to the sincerity of our own hearts.”<sup>88</sup>

Consciousness to the sincerity of one’s heart is not synonymous to evaluation of one’s behaviors. It is not the same as being “good” or “obedient.” Obedience to God is important; however, “obedience is a poor substitute to surrender to love...What God desires is surrender to his love. God is love. To know [God] genuinely is to love him. And

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<sup>86</sup> Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* (Collegeville, MN: The Order of St. Benedict, Inc., 1960), 33.

<sup>87</sup> Howard Baker, *Soul Keeping: Ancient Paths of Spiritual Direction* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1998), 58.

<sup>88</sup> Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation*, 75.

those we love we seek to serve...genuine Christian obedience is always much more like the response of lovers to each other than that of slaves to masters.”<sup>89</sup> But it is here where a problem often lies for believers, especially those with a history of abuse: the pattern of obedience seems much safer than interacting in areas of intimacy within God’s love for an abuse survivor.

#### What Is the Problem? Introduction of the “False Self” and View of Others

A real crisis can come to the forefront for a person who is a survivor of abuse if that person desires to live a contemplative and reflective life in the Spirit. A lifetime of protection against hurt can come crashing against God’s desire that she come to God unhindered and open for relationship. Like Adam and Eve, the need to cover up can create a false self. In fact, “listening to the true self may be a countercultural experience. Many...have families, jobs, even churches where the false self is affirmed.”<sup>90</sup>

It is equally true that hurting people are often told that common human emotions—fear around trauma, tears around loss, depression around abusive relationships, for example—have no place in the Christian life. Rather, many are told that happiness ought solely to be at the core of a Christian’s experience. Some hold this up as if such an emotion were expressive of one’s holiness. “...many disciples today equate their joy with their happiness factors. Joy contains happiness, but happiness is not equal to joy. In fact, happiness is subservient to joy. In the true sense of the biblical word, joy is

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<sup>89</sup> David G Benner, *Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship & Direction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 121.

<sup>90</sup> Alice Fryling, *Seeking God together: An Introduction in Group Spiritual Direction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009), 117.

rooted solely in God...Joy is exuberance over the unfailing love of God despite our happiness or lack thereof."<sup>91</sup>

This need for constant expression of happiness, rooted in the false self, flies in the face of the truth of God's love for humankind. The Christian life is often, at its core, an interaction with struggle and in the process of that struggle often reside emotional responses to life circumstances. "In the story of Jacob and the heavenly figure with whom he wrestles, we begin to see the elements of struggle, and the unfolding, as well, of the...gifts of the spirit that go with them."<sup>92</sup> It is through this struggle that believers grow in spiritual development. "The great secret of life is how to survive struggle without succumbing to it...a spirituality of struggle exposes the secret to the world."<sup>93</sup>

Note that in God's interaction with Jacob (Genesis 32:22-32) there was no assertion that the pain ought to be ignored. In fact, it was the reality of the pain and the submission to God in the midst of it that was deemed Jacob's success. A believer's life, as well, exists "in the now," not at the space one desires life to be. "In simple terms, the Nativity of Christ, the Lord in Bethlehem, is not something that I make present by fantasy. Since he is the eternal Word of God before whom time is entirely and simultaneously present, the Child born in Bethlehem 'sees' me here and now."<sup>94</sup>

In truth, God came to humans as I AM "not the I-will-be, the I-was, the I-could-be, but the I-am. The present moment, the present set of circumstances, the present

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<sup>91</sup> Stephen A. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Disciple: Ten Traits of a Vital Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 118.

<sup>92</sup> Joan D. Chittister, *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 19.

<sup>93</sup> Chittister, *Scarred* 13.

<sup>94</sup> Kenneth Leech, *Soul Friend: Spiritual Direction in the Modern World* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2001), 87.



relationships in our lives—this is where God lives.”<sup>95</sup> It certainly fits that “I AM THAT I AM is the clearest and most convincing revelation of the presence of God that we have (always, of course, excepting Jesus, the Word-made-flesh). The sentence is seismic.”<sup>96</sup> Christ was, of course, privy to all human suffering in his sacrificial death.

Mature Christian living takes into account that life includes both positive moments and challenging and painful ones and “recognizes and expects the rhythm of Good Friday and Easter in life and therefore sees meaning at the heart of suffering.”<sup>97</sup> Life does not guarantee that all things will always go well.

Reflection, when it is real reflection, allows a person to move beyond the compulsion to interact with God and others with the protection of a false self or with a false reality. True reflection and meditative awareness of God's word becomes a place by which a person is changed. That person is changed from someone who hides herself from God to someone who is willing to trust God with her own well-being and life; in fact, her own self. Therefore, true reflection has submission as its core attribute. “Jesus makes this unmistakably clear when he says, ‘If anyone would come after me, he or she must deny himself or herself,’ and ‘whoever loses his or her self for my sake will find it. (Matt 16:24-25). “Jesus is not talking about giving up candy for Lent. He is calling for the abandonment of our entire, pervasive, deeply entrenched matrix of self-referenced

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<sup>95</sup> Fryling, *Seeking God Together*, 22.

<sup>96</sup> Peterson, *Christ Plays in 10,000 Places*, 156.

<sup>97</sup> Gene Barrette, “Spiritual Direction in the Roman Catholic Tradition,” in *Spiritual Direction and the Care of Souls: A Guide to Christian Approaches and Practices* ed. Gary W. Moon and David G. Benner (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 62.

being.”<sup>98</sup> Jesus is calling for an abandonment of a false self as well as the abandonment of worship of a false god.

### False Image of God

But it is this interaction with the “here and now” and one’s pain in the struggle that an individual’s false views of God may be pushed to the forefront. Does God care about the pain? Does God care about the memories of abuse, the travail of PTSD, for example? Is it something done wrong that God is punishing? Perhaps the person has not been “good enough” to earn a life that feels full and meaningful. Perhaps such a desire is wrong. A false image of God may be the result of such concerns.

For example, it seems important to again consider the fact that if one’s abuse is at the hand of a male perpetrator, and if one has heard consistently only about God in terms of patriarchal themes, then “God is a mighty warrior, stern judge, law-giving father, under whose dominion all things fall.”<sup>99</sup> If images of God as “stern judge,” or “law-giving father” are upheld... “we can... assume that life is a ‘plan’ that God makes for us. We see ourselves in this view, as a collection of dancing puppets on a string, free within the range of the twine but captive to its latitude... whatever happens happens because God wants whatever perverted, malignant thing it is. Everything is always God’s will:... God’s will that women are routinely beaten and routinely ignored... God’s will that my life is warped and broken and desperately unstable... This spirituality feeds the notion that God is responsible for evil—not we, not I.”<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Robert M. Mulholland, Jr., *The Deeper Journey: The Spirituality of Discovering Your True Self* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), 47.

<sup>99</sup> Chittister, *Scarred*, 24.

<sup>100</sup> Chittister, *Scarred*, 14.

With such a view of God there is little opportunity to change one's life circumstances. Such a view causes believers to be "merely victims of God's designs."<sup>101</sup> If survivors of abuse live as victims of a malicious God who desires to inflict pain upon humankind, a certain sense of self-hatred may evolve. "In my experience, self-hatred is the dominant malaise crippling Christians and stifling their growth in the Holy Spirit."<sup>102</sup> This is one false view of God.

There is an equally false view of God. This view understands God to be an extension of human whim and desire. This God becomes one where prosperity is, itself, an indicator of a person's goodness and spiritual growth. Chittister labels this God "The Magician."

There is a second way to deal with struggle, just as groundless...as the first. We can assume that God is the Magician whose role it is to save us from the realities of life. God the Magician molds circumstances and consequences to our liking. This God makes red lights turn green so we're not inconvenienced at street corners and sees to it that death and suffering and pain become a kind of vending machine game. Put enough suffering in, get a blessing out...a spirituality of God the Magician makes life an exercise in spiritual huckstering...all we need to do to be holy...is to believe that pain is "better" for us here than happiness would be, that the more unhappy we are here, the happier we will be somewhere else. Then the rabbit will appear in the hat, the black silk scarf will turn to gold, the problem in the box will disappear.<sup>103</sup>

This "false god" is an issue that often comes forth in reflection: humans wish to have a god who is readily at their disposal and with whom prayer results in satisfying desires and wants. There is a reason why God states in the Ten Commandments that idols must not be worshiped: false gods exist as an extension of the human desire for

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<sup>101</sup> Chittister, *Scarred*, 14.

<sup>102</sup> Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1994), 20.

<sup>103</sup> Chittister, *Scarred* 100.

control. Certainly “giving up Baal means that we give up control over God...giving up Baal means that we let go of the comforting illusions that allow us to live in guilt-free dishonesty...giving up Baal means that we have to grow up.”<sup>104</sup> Giving up Baal means that one cannot be one’s own god.

Remaining “one’s own god” allows for, at least, the belief that one can control one’s own life. Engaging in a growing relationship with Christ creates a tension with that desire for control. This tension can cause a struggle. As stated by Chittister, “the first gift of struggle is the call to conversion—the call to think differently about who God is and about who I am as an individual.”<sup>105</sup>

Conversion is based in the reality that something needs to be changed. That is based in thoughts around sin. Sin is a necessary topic in the life of a believer. It is important while reflecting on the spiritual life with a woman who has survived abuse to hold up a proper interpretation of what “sinner” actually means. “The word *sinner* is a theological designation...it is not a moralistic judgment...*Sinner* means something is awry between humans and God. In that state people may be wicked, unhappy, anxious and poor...they may be virtuous, happy and affluent...the theological fact is that humans are not close to God and are not serving God.”<sup>106</sup>

Leech describes sin by considering its understanding within Jewish thought: “Today, when we tend to have moralistic notions of sin, we need to recover the theological understanding of the Scriptures, and to remember that sin for Jews was seen

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<sup>104</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Jesus Way: A Conversation on the Ways that Jesus is the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 125.

<sup>105</sup> Chittister, *Scarred*, 24.

<sup>106</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 118.

as quenching of the Spirit.”<sup>107</sup> The sinner, then, is not necessarily evil or saintly. As stated previously, he or she comes at a relationship with God as a “false self” embracing a “false view of God.” Sin could be seen as “ultimately a refusal to believe that what God wants is my happiness and fulfillment. When I fail to believe this, I am tempted to sin—to take my life into my own hands, assuming that I am in the best position to determine what will lead to my happiness.”<sup>108</sup> God’s desire is to return to an individual the original blessings that would be hers in Christ.

Looking beyond the challenges of “original sin” to God’s restoring of “original blessings” may lead to a third, healthy way of viewing the relationship between humans and God. This view, recognizing that God desires to restore humanity to its original blessing, holds in tension the desires of God and the free will of humanity. This may be considered by way of Greek grammar and its “middle voice.”

The middle voice in Greek is “the use of the verb which describes the subjects as participating in the results of the action.”<sup>109</sup> This occurs in a believer’s prayer. In prayer, “I do not control the action; that is a pagan concept of prayer, putting the gods to work by my incantations or rituals. I am not controlled by the action; that is a Hindu concept of prayer in which I slump passively into the impersonal and fated will of the gods and goddesses.”<sup>110</sup> Instead, a believer enters into “the action begun by another, my creating and saving Lord, and find myself participating in the results of the action. I neither do it, nor have it done to me; I will to participate in what is willed.”<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Leech, *Soul Friend*, 164.

<sup>108</sup> Benner, *Sacred Companions*, 39.

<sup>109</sup> Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*, 103.

<sup>110</sup> Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*, 104.

<sup>111</sup> Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*, 104.

This may be seen in Paul's letter to the Colossians. The Greek word for "died" in Paul's words, "Since you died with Christ," is written with an active form of the verb, "indicating that dying with Christ is something we are actively involved in. We must 'take up our cross,' we must acknowledge and relinquish our false self,"<sup>112</sup> knowing that contemplative living causes one to be "preparing for a 'good death'"<sup>113</sup> and the restoration of a true self.

Accordingly, "at our human and Christian best we are not fascists barking our orders to God and his creatures. At our human and Christian best we are not quietists dumbly submissive before fate. At our human and Christian best we pray in the middle voice at the center between active and passive, drawing from them as we have need and occasion but always uniquely and artistically ourselves, creatures adoring God and being graced by him, 'participating in the results of the action.'"<sup>114</sup>

### **Redrawing the Images: Interaction of the Holy Spirit**

It is important to note that a person who has been abused, and who is desirous of a contemplative relationship with God, may find a place of vulnerability there that she was not anticipating. Part of the role of a spiritual guide is to work with another in the intersection between "false self" and "true self," "false God," and "true God," and to help that person to put aside images or masks that may be used to provide protection and which, in order to cope, may have been set up since childhood. "On the one hand, this

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<sup>112</sup> Mulholland, *The Deeper Journey*, 82.

<sup>113</sup> Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (New York: Cowley Publications, 1992), 34.

<sup>114</sup> Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*, 105.

relationship calls an individual to living freely and openly, to be able to admit fears, illusions and insecurities.”<sup>115</sup>

On the other hand, the truth remains that if a person does not sense herself as loved by God, it is challenging to let go of things that seem to make sense of life, even if such things are not good for a person. A person involved in the midwifery of care of souls would be well-served by keeping in mind the fact that “Jesus was not able to accomplish [moving beyond death] until the Spirit of God clearly persuaded him that God loved him. It follows that we can’t, either. Until we encounter grace in its inexhaustible totality, we dare not contemplate death to ourselves, to the world, to anything at all.”<sup>116</sup> After all, this truly is the ultimate in submission: the ability to allow certain things to die.

If, then, the “middle voice” of interaction with God is kept in mind, one may come to contemplation and silence with the awareness that she is willingly allowing herself to be quiet and still before God, “to stand before God with the mind in the heart, and to go on standing before him unceasingly day and night until the end of life.”<sup>117</sup> She is to stand before God with the integration of personality, mind and heart. Note that she is not compelled to do so but is making herself available—to listen to an invitation from God. She waits and is aware of the “God who Comes,” knowing that God’s arrival is not controlled by her behavior. Carlo Carretto writes, “God comes like the sun in the morning—when it is time. We must assume an attitude of waiting, accepting the fact that

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<sup>115</sup> Fryling, *Seeking God Together*, 117.

<sup>116</sup> Gary W. Moon & David G. Benner, *Spiritual Direction and the Care of Souls* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 90.

<sup>117</sup> Leech, *Soul Friend*, 163.

we are creatures and not creator. We must do this because it is not our right to do anything else; the initiative is God's, not ours.<sup>118</sup>

This desire to interact with God occurs not because God will instill wrath on a person if it is not so, but, rather, because of the awareness that "my Abba is very fond of me."<sup>119</sup> "My dignity as Abba's child is my most coherent sense of self. When I seek to fashion a self-image from the adulation of others and the inner voice whispers, 'You've arrived; you're a player in the Kingdom enterprise,' there is not truth in that self-concept. When I sink into despondency and the inner voice whispers, 'You're no good, a fraud, a hypocrite, and a dilettante,' there is no truth in any image shaped from that message."<sup>120</sup> The interaction with God is based upon God's desire to interact with that person as she is, not as she desires to be perceived, and not based upon any expected "goodness" or "badness." "To walk in grace is to allow ourselves the experience of being loved by Christ. Though it sounds easy, opening ourselves to the love of another can be a risky proposition."<sup>121</sup>

Being aware of the truth about her identity in Christ can allow a woman who has been abused to begin to form healthy relationships with others. This is important because abused women are often living with an "outdated map" for journeying through life. That map includes unhealthy views of how people should interact with each other and of how one ought to interact with God. "...If our needs are not met, if we are

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<sup>118</sup> Carlo Carretto, *The God Who Comes* (New York: Orbis Books, 1974), 28.

<sup>119</sup> Manning, *Abba's Child*, 63.

<sup>120</sup> Manning, *Abba's Child*, 63.

<sup>121</sup> Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* (Collegeville, MN: The Order of St. Benedict, Inc., 1960), 79.



neglected, beaten, abused, criticized, hated or resented for existing, then our very ability to trust and be vulnerable is injured.”<sup>122</sup>

Living as a “true self” is similar to “changing one’s map” of life. “Some of our convictions about the world are like outdated maps. Although they may have been accurate at one time, they are no longer. However, since we don’t have the knowledge or the experience to update them, we still use them to try to find our way.”<sup>123</sup> Reflection is a means by which an abuser can see herself as a person deeply loved by God. A process of “redrawing the map” of how she sees herself can begin in God’s presence. Redrawing the map by a reflective, contemplative relationship helps the abuse survivor to see beyond the false identity that the person abusing her may have inflicted upon her.

What, then, is a true self? It could be said that one must “grow into” such an image. This can often occur within a reflective relationship of direction where truths related to a person that are being revealed by the Spirit are held up and examined as places of invitation toward growth and healing. “...The inner healing of the heart is seldom a sudden catharsis or an instant liberation from bitterness, anger, resentment, and hatred. More often it is a gentle growing into oneness with the Crucified who has achieved our peace through his blood on the cross.”<sup>124</sup> “This is what meditation meant to St. Paul: the finding of ourselves in Christ, the penetration of the Scriptures by divinely enlightened love, the discovery of our divine adoption and the praise of his glory.”<sup>125</sup>

Reflection exists as a holistic interaction between Creator and creation. “Reflection involves not only the mind but also the heart, and indeed our whole being.

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<sup>122</sup> Cloud, *Changes that Heal*, 69.

<sup>123</sup> Cloud, *Changes that Heal*, 70.

<sup>124</sup> Manning, *Abba’s Child*, 68.

<sup>125</sup> Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation*, 55.

One who really meditates does not merely think, he also loves and by his love...he enters into that reality and knows it so to speak from within, by a kind of identification."<sup>126</sup>

The identification moves from that of a false self, desirous to hide sin, to the real self, desirous to, with God, do battle against sin. Stephen Macchia states that such a desire, for a disciple, is a lifelong journey "of loving with heart, soul, mind and strength everyone and everything that Jesus loves. In order for this journey to be properly cultivated, it takes a daily abiding in Christ on behalf of the disciple. The key...is to begin by receiving for oneself the love of God—a gift to be welcomed with an open heart since it cannot be earned."<sup>127</sup>

There is here the understanding that Christian spirituality is, at its core, relational and changing in terms of depth, direction, focus and understanding of Christ, others, and self. Relationships "tend to be amorphous, open, changing and evolving."<sup>128</sup> A relationship with Christ is no different. But, this is challenging. In order for the relationship with Christ to be changing and evolving, all the jumble of understandings and desires, relationships and emotions, must be brought to God in prayer. In prayer, the blowing of *pneuma*—the interaction of Spirit with human spirit—can be noticed. Longings for relationship with God can be noticed—"Longings reflect spirit bubbling up to the surface—what we might theologically describe as a response of spirit to Spirit. Attending to the spiritual is attending to these stirrings in our depths."<sup>129</sup> New life can

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<sup>126</sup> Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation*, 43.

<sup>127</sup> Stephen A. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Disciple: Ten Traits of a Vital Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 64.

<sup>128</sup> Ben Johnson, "Spiritual Direction in the Reformed Tradition," in *Spiritual Direction and the Care of Souls* ed. Gary W. Moon and David G. Benner (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 101.

<sup>129</sup> Benner, *Sacred Companions*, 74.

come forth from the ashes of an abused history. The false self can be replaced by God's desirable image for a person.

There must be spaces for quietness, a place to simply be "the child of God." "We all need a place to be a child, no matter how old we are...and so it is with the soul at rest in God. We do not put on airs. We do not try to make things seem better than they are...in times of solitude, the soul rests in God by simply being with God with what is."<sup>130</sup> In fact, if prayer can be given a definition of "nothing but love, then when we pray, we are allowing ourselves to be loved by God and we open ourselves to experience and to reflect that love in whatever way it's manifested."<sup>131</sup>

The spiritual life exists at the intersection of Word, prayer and reflection. Being aware of the humanity of the abuse survivor who resides at this intersection is necessary to journeying alongside in a caring, Christ-like way. It is by this caring that an abuse survivor will be free to worship at the meeting of true self with true God. Healing of an abuse survivor might be reflected in the ability to interact with God in a functional way. That functionality includes trust that God can be allowed to own all the challenges of life. This healing is also reflected in a change in life patterns to include people who are not abusive to the woman in any way: physically, emotionally, sexually or spiritually.

Besides the interactions of word, prayer and reflection is the necessity for education around the very important concept of abuse. There are many texts, both secular texts and Christian texts that speak about the area of abuse. The following books, some included in the preceding discussion, were written from a Christian

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<sup>130</sup> Ruth Haley Barton, *Invitation to Solitude and Silence: Experiencing God's Transforming Presence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 77.

<sup>131</sup> Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation*, 87.

worldview. These are important to highlight for a woman seeking freedom from abuse and for those who desire to assist her. These books include:

- *Changes that Heal: How to Understand Your Past to Ensure a Healthier Future* by Dr. Henry Cloud
- *Mending the Soul: Understanding and Healing Abuse* by Steven R. Tracy
- *Beyond Abuse in the Christian Home: Raising Voices for Change* by House of Prisca and Aquila
- *Domestic Violence: What Every Pastor Needs to Know* by Al Miles
- *Learning to Trust Again: A Young Woman's Journey of Healing from Sexual Abuse* by Christa Sands
- *Joy through the Night: Biblical Resources for Suffering People* by Aida Besancon Spencer & William David Spencer
- *Keeping the Faith: Guidance for Christian Women Facing Abuse* by Marie M. Fortune

God desires freedom in proper submission in the life of a survivor of abuse to be similar to the following poem, "The Dance."

*Another's heart lays down the beat that puts  
Me in motion, in perichoresis, steps  
Learned in the womb before the world's foundation.  
It never misses a beat: praise pulses.*

*Leaping toward the light, I'm dancing in  
The dark, touching now the belly of blessing,  
Now the aching side, ready for birth,  
For naming and living love's mystery out in the open.*

*The nearly dead and the barely alive pick up  
The chthonic rhythms in their unused muscles.*

*And gaily cartwheel three hallelujahs.  
But not all: "Those who are deaf always despise*

*Those who dance." That doesn't stop the dance:  
All waiting light leap at the voice of greeting.<sup>132</sup>*

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<sup>132</sup> Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*, 169.

## CHAPTER 4

### PROJECT DESIGN

#### **“Discovering God, Discovering Yourself” Spiritual Formation Group**

##### Church Demographics of First Baptist Church, Exeter, NH

The following is a description of the spiritual formation group that met at First Baptist Church of Exeter, NH. The group was assembled solely from regular worship attenders. There were no specifics placed on the demographics of the group, other than stipulating that the group was designed for women. The group was to reflect as closely as possible a typical group that would come together within the life of a small, New England Baptist Church. No stipulation was made that only women who have been abused should be part of the group.

The group that met was comprised originally of three women, all 41-49 years of age. On the second week a woman who was 75-85 years of age began attending. She did not attend after this week.

The church typically has 53 adults who take part in the worship service each week. Of these, approximately 18 are male, representing about a third of the congregation. The remainder is women, representing roughly two-thirds of the congregation. This is higher than the national average of 58.3% for women in a congregation.<sup>1</sup> Of these, 8 are in the younger group (18-40), 15 in the middle group (41-57) and 12 in the older group (56 and upward). (See Figures 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3).

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<sup>1</sup> The Association of Religion Data Archives,  
[http://www.thearda.com/Denoms/D\\_1454\\_p.asp](http://www.thearda.com/Denoms/D_1454_p.asp) (accessed December 27, 2011).

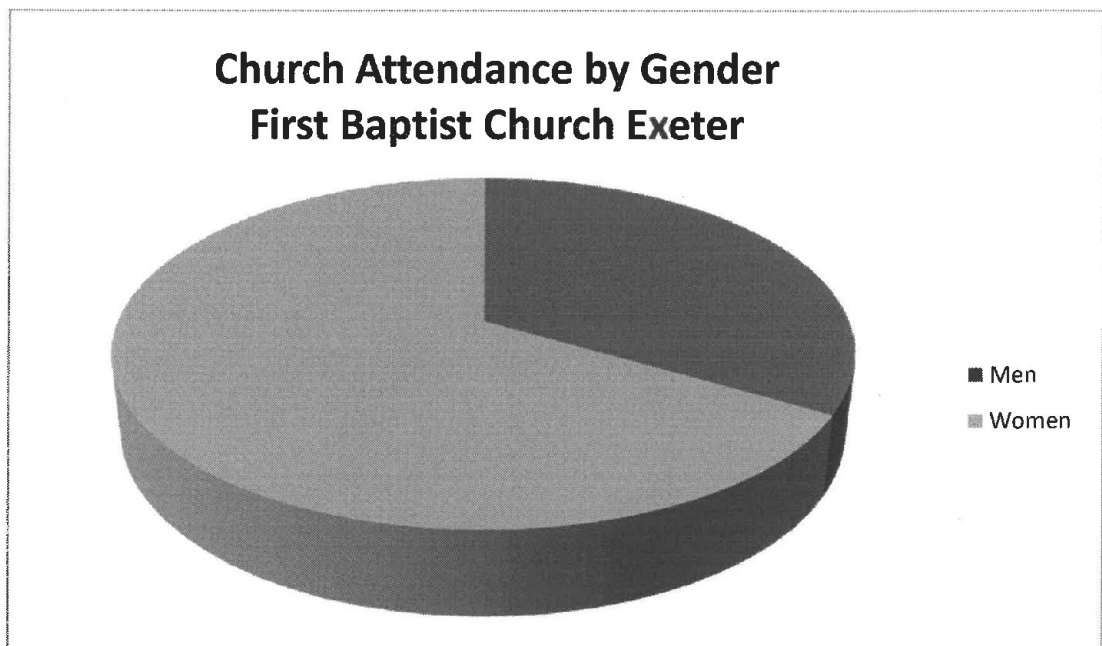


Figure 4.1. Church Attendance by Gender, First Baptist Church, Exeter

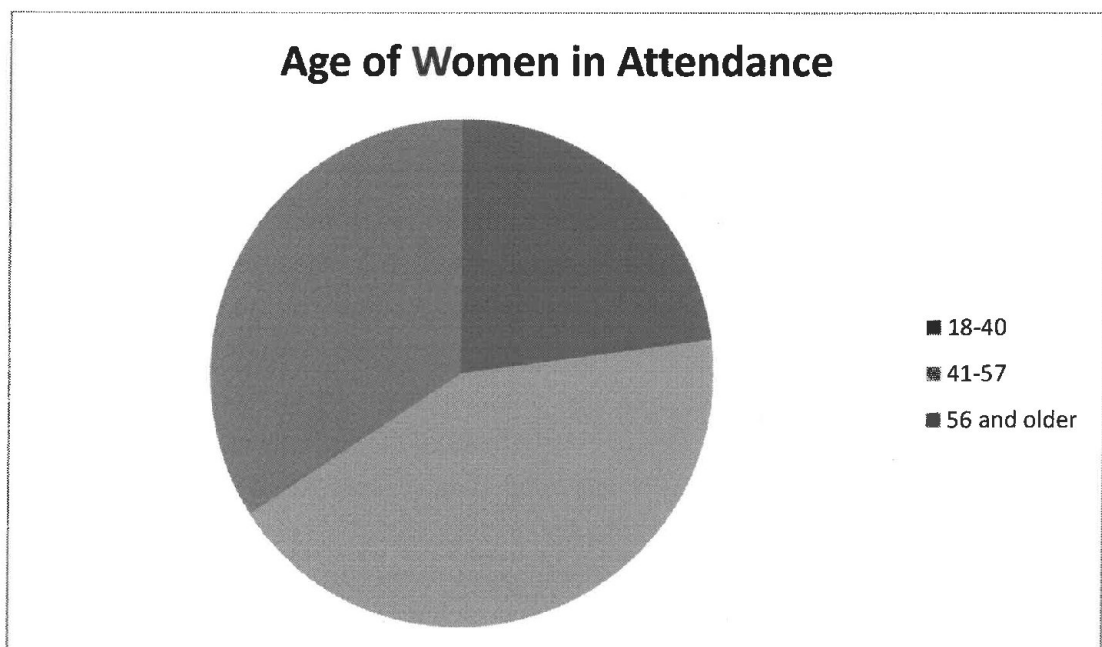


Figure 4.2. Age of Women in Attendance, First Baptist Church, Exeter

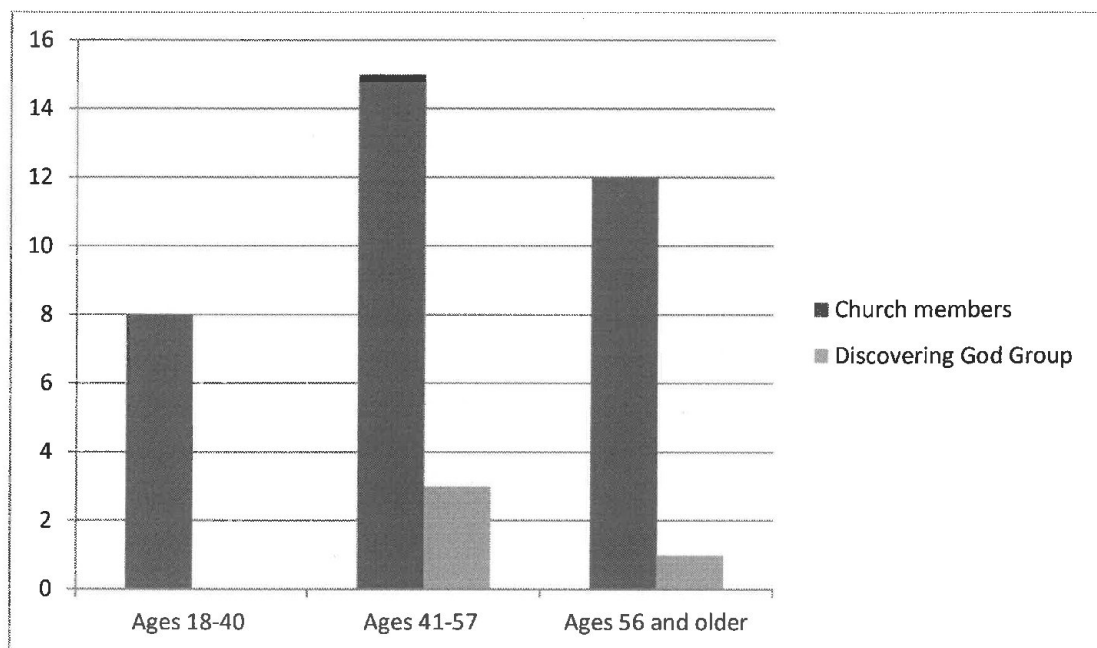


Figure 4.3. Number of Women Church Members by Age in “Discovering God, Discovering Yourself” Group

The church has presently been in a growth period; in fact, there has been a 58% increase in church attendance over the past three years. During a recent Sunday, 47 were in attendance, meaning that seven who regularly attend were not in attendance. Of the 47 who were in attendance during that Sunday, 36 are new or have renewed their involvement in the church over the past three years. New membership is approximately 78% of the people in attendance on a regular church service.<sup>2</sup>

Women who attend worship services are comprised of roughly eight women who would be in the younger group, fifteen who would be in the middle group and twelve in the older group. The majority in the “Discovering God, Discovering Yourself” group was comprised of individuals representing the middle group. The people remaining in the group for all six weeks were from this age group.

<sup>2</sup> Statistics, Rev. Dr. Deanna J. Swilling, First Baptist Church, Exeter, NH. November, 2011.

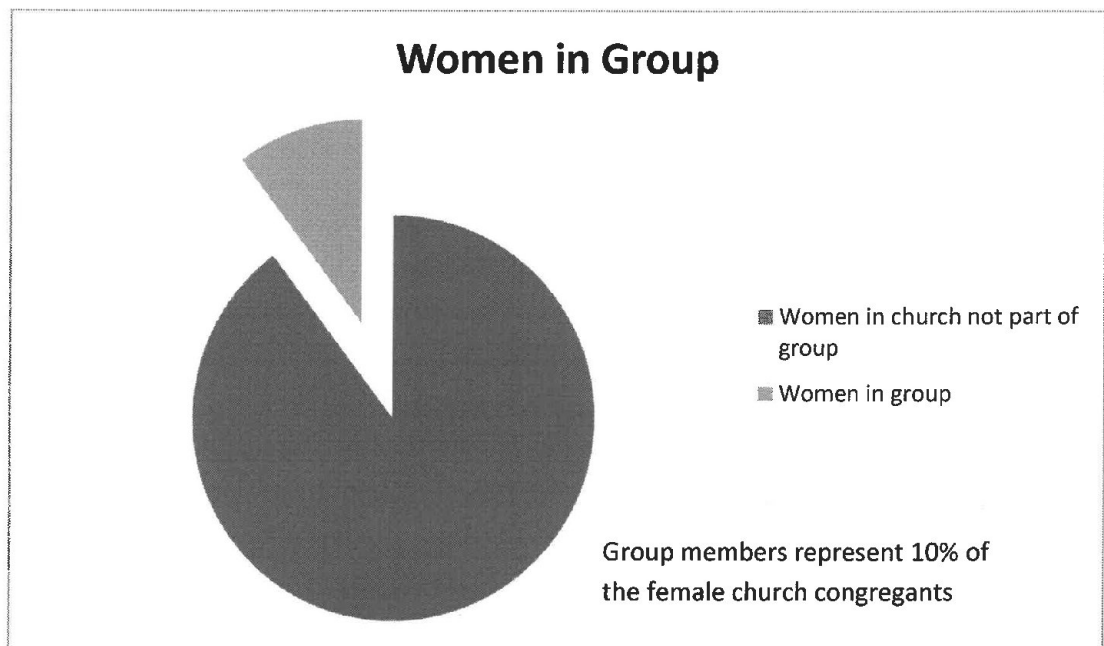


Figure 4.4. Percent of Women in “Discovering God, Discovering Yourself” Group

The purpose of the group was to serve as a spiritual formation group and specifically to explore whether or not women of Christian faith within a New England setting who report having lived through an abusive relationship have different views on the concept of submission than do women who have not reported being abused in an interpersonal relationship. For the purposes of this study and group, no parameters were placed upon the kind of abuse. Also, no stipulation was made that only individuals who consider themselves as survivors of abuse should attend. The discussion involved in this report includes abuse that may be physical, sexual, verbal or emotional. Group members were not asked to formally reveal abuse that may have occurred and were encouraged to share only to that level that was comfortable to them.

In order to help accommodate both the needs of church programming and the needs of women attending, the group was designed in a Bible study/discussion group



format. The group started with three women. Another woman joined the group for one meeting and then did not resume attendance. The group itself was comprised of two women who self-identified as having been abused and two women who had not reported abuse. The demographics of the group that finished were two women who self-identified as abused and one who stated she had not been in an abusive relationship. While not sought intentionally, the group that remained together represents a subgroup of the church that is comprised of people who are either new to the church or new to the Christian faith.

This group was established as a “pseudo-experimental group” since there was no specific control group by which to compare group responses or outcomes. No attempt was made to eliminate potentially confounding variables—for example, age, socioeconomic or marital status—from this study. The desire was to have it resemble a typical church ministry. In order to see if changes in attitude around submission actually occurred within the group or had been changed for those who had been abused, a pre-assessment<sup>3</sup> was given during the first week of the study. After the last week of the group, a post-assessment was administered.<sup>4</sup> Confidentiality of responses was maintained by use of a numerical code (the last four digits of a Social Security number). That code was used on both the pre-assessment and post-assessment. Finally, two weeks after the group ended, the women were sent an invitation to take part in a three question survey through Survey Monkey which further assessed some attitudes related to submission.<sup>5</sup> The same format to maintain confidentiality was used with this assessment.

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<sup>3</sup> Appendix 1, page 146.

<sup>4</sup> Appendix 2, page 148.

<sup>5</sup> Appendix 3, page 150.

Many of the weekly topics were based on Benner's book, *Surrender to Love*.<sup>6</sup> The content was originally designed as a PowerPoint presentation. Because the church did not have a projector, the group used the information much more informally. This seemed to fit the group well. Because of that, the informal format is used in this discussion. The PowerPoint presentation is included in the Appendix.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the course of the six weeks, information related to each woman's spiritual walk and time in the group was relayed to the others. All the women who continued on this group desired to be part of a community and to build fellowship with a group of women. Because of this, personal information was shared somewhat freely with the other group members. In order to help to gain a sense of the group, some of that information is provided below. The names of the women have been changed in order to maintain confidentiality. To further provide for privacy, not all information provided to the group has been disseminated in these sketches labeled as Figures 4.5, 4.6, 4.7 and 4.8, below.

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<sup>6</sup> Benner, *Surrender to Love*.

<sup>7</sup> Appendix 5, page 154.

### Biographical, Emotional and Spiritual Sketch of Each of the Women

#### "Andrea"

Andrea stated that she had been spiritually wandering for a while. After getting married she had moved from the south to the north. She grew up as an Episcopalian. She relates faith to being a time of gradual awareness of God with a present greater understanding of God and desire to attend church. Andrea also stated that "I tried to not come to this church, but God had other ideas." Her intention was to attend another church but its service times did not work for her and her family. She stated that she felt accepted and loved when she entered the church the first week. She is married and has a son.

Andrea and her family reside at a local school, serving as resident assistants at the school. Her husband also serves as an instructor in the school. Andrea ran for public office but was not successful in being elected. She recounts that as a challenging time for her and one where she questioned God's presence with her. Andrea reports that she has never experienced an abusive relationship.

Andrea is presently serving in a volunteer position in the town of Exeter. Andrea was in attendance for four of the six weeks.

Figure 4.5. Biographical Sketch of "Andrea"

#### "Lori"

Lori is a divorced woman with three children, ranging from later adolescence through to age seven. Lori's former husband is of a Jewish background and there are some struggles related to how the parents will raise these children spiritually. Presently in a custody battle, she brought these concerns to the group. Lori is employed at home as a consultant. She also states that she wrestles with self-esteem issues and that she has lived through an abusive relationship.

Lori related her faith as having occurred within a "born-again" framework. "I went forward when I was 13." Since then, she feels as if she has wandered from the faith and that she, at times, attempts to hide from God because she doesn't feel "good enough." She also related a desire to not attend this church (her mother is a member), but she also relates that God had other ideas for her.

Lori missed one week of the group, due to the power outage that impacted the area.

Figure 4.6. Biographical Sketch of "Lori"

#### "Amanda"

Amanda had survived an abusive relationship. She is presently in a relationship with her husband that is "emotionally challenging." She has been married to him for 5 years. Amanda has no children. She states that she expresses love for others through her direct care work and care for her pets. Amanda states that she deals with issues of self-esteem, dislikes her job and feels as if others take advantage of her in terms of her role as a caregiver. Amanda is a fairly new member of the church and states that she had "resisted coming to First Baptist Church but God had other ideas for me. I came because of my direct care employment. I had to bring Mark (name changed—person she works with in her direct care capacity) to church. When I walked in the church building I felt like I was accepted in ways that I hadn't been in my life before." In spite of this and because of other factors in her life, it is still hard to think of herself as loved unconditionally by God. Amanda has had issues related to weight loss, and has gone through gastric bypass surgery in the past.

Amanda reports that the process of faith for her did not occur as a result of a "born again" experience but as the result of a gradual, deepening awareness of God in her life. Amanda also reports that, at 18, she decided to leave her home and move "out west" without any knowledge of what she would do for work or where she would live. This was done, in part, to deal with challenges in her family of origin. She recounts it as a "big adventure," but thinks it may be the cause of her still working in direct care when she would rather be doing something else—like owning a coffee shop and enjoying positive interactions with other people.

Because one week involved illness for some in the group and a power outage due to an early winter storm, Amanda attended the group alone one week, resulting in a one-on-one experience with the leader of the group. She attended all 6 weeks.

Figure 4.7. Biographical Sketch of "Amanda"

#### "Frances"

Frances began the group on the second week but only attended for that one week. Frances was married twice and widowed both times. She has several children and grandchildren. Frances does not report having survived any form of abuse relationship. She reports that she has been part of FBCE for many years and states that she was raised in an evangelical church. Her grandfather was a pastor. One of her daughters is also a pastor in a western state. She relates her faith as being centrally focused in the church and does not relate any other background than Baptist. Much of her faith has been expressed through her connection to the church and her commitment to an American Baptist Camp in the area. Her faith walk has involved a cross-country bicycle trip with her grandson, support of a local denominational camp and to strong involvement in the church. Presently she has experienced the death of several close church members and is finding that challenging. Frances did not give specific reasons for stopping her involvement in the group. However, she did need to provide child care to a granddaughter one evening and also expressed concerns about driving at night, citing its challenges for her.

Figure 4.8. Biographical Sketch of "Frances"

### Description of the Six Week Schedule

In order to have a picture of the group itself, comments and observations (subjective data generated by the group) will be included as discussion throughout the content of each week that is depicted below. Some of the content was adjusted as time went on and as the needs of the group became more apparent. Originally the group was to include some lectio divina around scripture verses. It became apparent that the majority of the group preferred a more direct interaction with the scripture as well as some guidance in location of scripture and some background on scripture that was being used each week. Lectio was used after one of the weeks of the group. This was a short, perhaps 5 minute, interaction. It was also suggested for one of the week's homework exercises.

The following chart (Fig. 4.9) represents the weekly format and topics used by the group.

Weekly Format and Topics of "Discovering God, Discovering Yourself," Group

Topic	Focus	Scriptures used
<b>Week 1</b> It Begins with Love (Prodigal Father—giving lavishly)	The problem of separation from God and process of restoration	Luke 15: 11-32 Genesis 1:2
<b>Week 2</b> The Beloved (The last, lost and the least of God's economy!)	Looking at God's "economy" regarding the importance of each human based on grace, not works	1 John 4:15-18 Luke 15
<b>Week 3</b> "Growing up" the Beloved	Exploring submission through the Lord's Prayer	Matthew 6:9-13 Lectio Romans 8:31-39
<b>Week 4</b> One-on-one with one group member	Had originally been scheduled for week #5's information. Due to sickness and power outage in the area, only one person attended. Week shifted to Week #5.	

Figure 4.9. Weekly Topics of "Discovering God, Discovering Yourself" Group

<b>Week 5</b> You as the Prodigal Father!	Purgation, Illumination and Union	Matthew 4:18-21 Mark 14:66-72 Acts 2
<b>Week 6</b>  True Self Vs. False Self (I am fine!)  (Originally had been scheduled as a wrap-up week. Included that as part of the content for the week)	Learning to allow the Spirit to direct things in life—floating versus treading water	Ezekiel 36:22-32 Luke 14:15-24

Figure 4.9. Weekly Topics of “Discovering God, Discovering Yourself” Group

The following (Fig. 4.10) represents the content for Week #1 of the group.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Week #1</b></p> <p>Complete surveys (each used the last 4 digits of her Social Security Number in order to keep the surveys confidential)</p> <p>Introduction</p> <p><u>Questions for Group:</u></p> <p>“Imagine God thinking about you. What do you assume God feels when you come to mind?” Some of the responses include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She’s a mess</li> <li>• God is happy I am here because now I can’t hide from him</li> <li>• Frustrated (in me)</li> <li>• “If she would just listen to me...”</li> <li>• “Because I said so”</li> <li>• God is...laughing with me</li> <li>• God is...forgiving</li> <li>• God knows every secret I have</li> <li>• God loves me, protects me, listens to me...</li> <li>• God is patient</li> <li>• “But...!” (You are okay, but...)</li> </ul> <hr/> <p>It Begins with Love<sup>8</sup></p> <p>Prodigal Father (Luke 15:11-32)</p> <p>Prodigal means “giving lavishly” in terms of father; “spending lavishly” in terms of son...</p> <p>1. “The story is about the character of the father, not the misdeeds of the son.”<sup>9</sup></p> <p>In spite of the sons’ behaviors, the father wishes a relationship with both of them</p>
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Figure 4.10. Week #1, “Discovering God, Discovering Yourself” Group

<sup>8</sup> Some content for the week pulled from and based on Benner’s first chapter, *Surrender to Love*, “It All Begins with Love” pages 19-33.

<sup>9</sup> Benner, *Surrender to Love*, 19.

that is not based in earning that love.

2. The behavior didn't "win" God's love because God loved both unconditionally.
3. That can be hard. Sometimes we want to earn it because we feel that we are in control of the relationship...the older son felt resentment for doing all the right things...[as seen in the story of the fall]
4. Both were not aware of the father who loved them unconditionally
- Discussion: It was difficult for many in the group to accept that God could love them in that way. For most, this was a new way of looking at this parable.

#### Creation as Love

This sentence must be viewed as an example of God's love rather than considering it in light of science<sup>10</sup>—"The Spirit brooding over the unformed elements of creation (Genesis 1:2)...just like Jesus' "How often I desired to gather your children together like a hen gathers her chicks under her wings..." (Luke 13:34)

God has created humans in God's image. God called humans "good"

1. God created humans with dignity
2. God created humans to be friends of God and to be in intimate communion with God.
3. God did not base that love upon behavior or human completion of "right things"—God's love is not conditional

#### The Story of the Fall

1. The story of the fall in many ways represents the human condition to seek love on our terms vs. love on God's terms
2. Continue to try to "earn" love by doing all the right things
3. Humans were never meant to "earn" the love of God—love on a "hamster wheel..."
  - a. People aren't meant to run and run in a circle, attempting to please and appease God. We are meant to listen to the love that God has for us and be still and allow God to speak that to us. Therefore...genuine love

#### Genuine Love

1. Jesus points believers toward the character of God
2. Genuine love is not the same as doing good things
3. Experiencing God's love is genuine love
4. Surrendering to that love means realizing that God loves in spite of our behaviors ("good or bad")
5. Genuinely loved by God
  - a. Challenges to that

#### Discussion

- It was hard for the group to think about God loving each of them in spite of certain behaviors. Much of what each had learned in terms of God's love was somewhat dependent upon love that had been shown to them by important maternal or paternal people in their lives. Also, two had learned in church settings that the love of God, to some degree, needed to be earned. Because of that, it was hard to think about what the younger son "did" in order to earn the love of the father.

Figure 4.10. Week #1, "Discovering God, Discovering Yourself" Group

<sup>10</sup> Benner, *Surrender to Love*, 20.

- The group discussed that Jesus was probably sharing much of this with the Pharisees who probably would have seen themselves in this. How fair is grace? Was it fair that the younger son got a party when the older son had been there all along? The group agreed that they often felt it was not fair, especially when they had done things that were right and others who didn't do things that were right also received good things from God. Both the older son and the younger son were not seemingly engaged in a love relationship with the father. Did the older son do anything to "earn" the love of the father? Are there times when you've felt like the older son? Felt like the younger son? Been aware of loving God as the father, or aware of the love of the father?
- How much of the older son's behavior in staying was actually love or was simply based in obligation to remain? The group interacted with the question about whether or not being compelled to love God is the same as loving God. The gospel can be difficult to embrace because it does not necessarily deal in "fairness."

Homework: Where do you sense God throughout the week? How does God speak to you?

Figure 4.10. Week #1, "Discovering God, Discovering Yourself" Group

The following (Fig. 4.11) describes the content and discussion of Week #2.

## **Week #2**

### Follow up to Week #1

- Lori arrived and stated that she was aware of feeling like the "older son" in regard to her former husband and feeling like she had been the "righteous one" because she had kept all the rules...the group spent some time discussing this. This was a new thought for Lori. The concept of being "righteous" but not "right" was also a new thought for many in the group.
- Amanda reported that she was aware of God's presence on her way home from the group the week before. She stated that saw a deer on the side of the road at the last minute when she was heading home last week. He was beautiful. "If I had not been thinking about God and taking time to notice, I would have missed this."
- The sheep would also need to trust that the shepherd had his or her best interest at heart and would need to not hide but allow the shepherd to provide the rescuing. Lori mentioned that, for her, she often felt a desire to hide when she was in that situation, feeling like God would be too angry with her to welcome her home.

Figure 4.11. Week #2, "Discovering God, Discovering Yourself" Group



### Love and Fear<sup>11</sup>

1 John 4:15-18

If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him or her and he or she lives in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in that person. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

1. Love...what does "perfect love" mean?
2. "Cast out" *ekballo* (cast out, throw out...replace...) Perfected love replaces fear
3. Parable of the Lost Sheep and lost coin...Luke 15... "If God catches up with me, he'll be angry." Yes? No?
4. It does not matter what the sheep did to get in that situation. God rejoices in its return regardless of its straying, etc.
5. God's "economy" is different than ours
6. Everyone counts!
7. Amazing grace!
8. God is not disappointed in you...God understands you.

### Discussion

- The fact that God in the parables cared for the one lost sheep seemed to resonate with many of the women who indicated that they also had felt the same about themselves. It was good to know that God did see them as important people regardless of the fact that the "99 sheep" were still there. Also, some time was spent thinking about the one lost coin—how important was one coin in a human economic system? It would have been expedient to not look for it. The widow was not satisfied without it in spite of her retention of the other coins.
- In regard to the comment "God is not disappointed in you", Frances stated that she believed that God actually COULD be disappointed in Christians when they don't do what God desires. The group thought about that in terms of the lost sheep and noted that when the shepherd carried the sheep home, there wasn't any reference to "How did you get yourself in that situation? I am disappointed in you." Instead, there probably was a reality that sheep will get themselves into bad situations at certain times. In some respects the shepherd expects that but does not like that that happens to the sheep. Learning from the shepherd helps the sheep make decisions that will enable it to not be in that position in the future. (This will be considered in the following week's topic on the "Lord's Prayer")
- The group also was struck by the fact that the one sheep was not left there. As with the lost coin, the fact that 99 sheep were a lot of sheep did not mean that the shepherd was satisfied with having one left outside of his care. Discussion came about around times that they felt themselves like this sheep.

Figure 4.11. Week #2, "Discovering God, Discovering Yourself" Group

<sup>11</sup> Some of the week's content is based in Benner's book, *Surrender to Love*, pages 35-51.

The following (Fig. 4.12) describes the content and discussion of Week #3.

### **Week #3 The Lord's Prayer...Growing Up the Beloved...Submission and Surrender**

After the last two weeks the group thought about "Lost Things" and how God loves them in spite of their "lostness." This week the group looked at how God wishes to "grow up" those who were lost...

At the core of the Lord's Prayer is a note of "submission." Spiritual maturity... God does not want us to remain as "baby believers," even though he wants us to see him as a child would...

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#### The Lord's Prayer...Matthew 6:9-13

*Our Father in Heaven*...what does it mean that Jesus is calling God "Father?"

The group considered the names that Scripture uses for God, considering both the "masculine" names (such as Father) and "feminine" names such as El Shaddai.

The group thought about "Father" and how Jesus was not necessarily directing believers toward a "male" God (since God is neither male nor female), but toward a relational being that we would understand within the construct of "father" and that God actually has shown humans what would be considered culturally feminine traits (such as care, binding up wounds, gathering chicks together under his wings, etc.) For some, God has always been a "masculine" God and "father" seems to fit that framework better. The group did not seem comfortable thinking of God outside of that grid. The group did think that it was pretty powerful that God wished to relate to us not as a "Being in the Sky" but as a relational God who wished to interact with each of them wherever she happened to "be" in life.

#### *In Heaven Your Name is "Holy"*

(...because your name is holy in heaven, let it also be the same way here on earth...)

- What does it mean to be "holy?" The group thought about that word, how often it gets used and prayed but how little it actually is understood...what is really meant in saying that God is "holy?" The group thought about that for a bit and came to the conclusion that that means allowing God to be in control of their lives indicates that God is "holy"—worthy of respect and able to lead.

#### *Your Kingdom Come and Your Will be Done, on earth as it is in heaven*

(subjunctive/indicative)

- The group thought about how God's will is already being done in heaven and that that means that God desires his will to happen here as well. Thought about the subjunctive nature of the first part of the statement ("please let this happen) and indicative nature of the second part of the statement (this is happening already).

Figure 4.12. Week #3, "Discovering God, Discovering Yourself" Group

*Give Us Our Bread for Today*

- Lori mentioned that she thought that this part of the prayer could not really refer to “literal” bread. She saw it more as figurative bread. Andrea saw this as referring to literal bread. Some discussion came about in regard to the audience to whom Jesus was addressing his comments. These people would have both needed the sustenance of physical bread as well as the sustenance of spiritual bread. Both were important to them and are also important to humans now. God is concerned for all aspects of human wellbeing.

*Forgive Us When We Sin...* “miss the mark” “*amartia*.” To miss the mark and not “share in the prize”

- The group talked about how “sin” is an important word for Christians to consider, even though it is not a popular word. Sin was looked at as both immoral acts that humans do as well as simply not having the omniscience of God and “missing the mark” of what is important. God expects that and sees humans as sinners. It is humans who put the value judgment on sin, not God.

*Help Us to Forgive Others When They Do Wrong Things to Us*

- This was difficult for many in the group. Lori reported that she thought that she had done this with her former husband but sometimes wondered. “I don’t want him to get away with some of the things he has done to me.” The group looked at what forgiveness is and what it is not and thought about how it sometimes “feels good” to hang on to the feelings of animosity that can come with not forgiving someone. The group thought about how forgiveness is an attitude and an act that they have to do but that it also is something that God directs if the person is willing to be submissive to God’s leading in it.
- The group also thought about the fact that “reconciliation” and “forgiveness” are not necessarily linked. This seemed to be a new thought for many but also a helpful thing.

*Lead Us Away from Temptation, Deliver Us from Evil.*

(Direct us toward things that are good for us and away from those things that would harm us)

If people are directed toward the things that are good for them, then they do not so precariously end up in places like the lost sheep. Bad things can happen in life, but God is still leading if people are willing to listen to God.

For yours is the kingdom, etc...

- What is the difference between “obey” and “surrender/submission?”
- What God desires is the submission of our heart and will, not simply compliance in our behavior.
- God’s unconditional love leads to God’s desire for what is best for us. God does not wish us to remain in a place/condition/life situation that will be bad for us. God desires for us to grow. That desire for our growth occurs for us in the relationship of “submission/surrender.”
- Treading water vs. floating...

“Faith might be precisely that ability to trust the river, to trust the flow and the

Figure 4.12. Week #3, “Discovering God, Discovering Yourself” Group

- lover... There is a river. The river is flowing: we are in it. The river is God's providential love."<sup>12</sup>
- We float only when we stop trying to do so. And we never discover that we do not need to do anything to stay afloat until we let go. That is surrender (submission).

Discussion... Has there been a time when you've been able to "surrender" and sense God with you in that place?

- Amanda related to the group a time that she had been sick with pneumonia and had been in the hospital. She felt really horrible and the doctors were very concerned because she was not responding at all to the drugs that were given or the treatment overall. She stated that she prayed in her hospital bed that God would help her to be aware of him there. She said, "I felt much better, I wasn't fighting so much but was trusting what God had to give to me. I could feel myself 'floating' and not trying to force myself to get better. The doctors were really surprised because I got better much faster after that."
- [Pictures had been drawn of a woman treading water and one floating—an example provided in Benner's book] Lori, pointing at the pictures: "I wish I could be more like THAT picture (the person floating). I feel more like I'm treading water all the time. Life is hard sometimes. I don't know how to let go and do that. How does someone do that when things are just so difficult?"
- Lori was clearly upset by some things that had happened during the week. She shared a bit that she felt like God was not there with her. The group helped to think through what it is like when it feels like God is not there. How does one trust that God is there when bad things happen? Thought about how God sometimes allows his children to struggle with things just as we sometimes allow our human children to do the same. God wants to "grow up" his children and sometimes, just like a child on a bicycle that might fall and then learn to ride on her own, God allows us to also do some of that. He is there but sometimes his presence is not noticed or revealed.
- The group discussed how to do that, the tendencies that each has during times of struggle. Did they tend to want to run, hide, give up or appropriately hand over to God what they could during those times? The point is that God understands already the natural tendencies and wants those parts to be brought to him rather than having them hidden.

Figure 4.12. Week #3, "Discovering God, Discovering Yourself" Group

<sup>12</sup> Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Crossroads, 1999), 121.

- After the discussion, the leader felt it important to lead in a lectio exercise with the group. Romans 8:31-39

After saying this, what can we add? With God on our side who can be against us? Since God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up to benefit us all, we may be certain, after such a gift, that he will not refuse anything he can give. Could anyone accuse those that God has chosen? When God acquits, could anyone condemn? Could Christ Jesus? No! He not only died for us—he rose from the dead, and there at God’s right hand he stands and pleads for us.

Nothing therefore can come between us and the love of Christ, even if we are troubled or worried, or being persecuted, or lacking food or clothes, or being threatened or even attacked...For I am certain of this: neither death nor life, no angel, no prince, nothing that exists, nothing still to come, not any power, or height or depth, no any created thing, can ever come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Figure 4.12 Week #3, “Discovering God, Discovering Yourself” Group

The following (Fig. 4.13) describes the content and discussion of Week #4

#### **Week #4**

A power outage in area and illness kept the group down to just Amanda and the leader. A good discussion took place. Discussed were topics related to life challenges for the group member, God’s call on her life to share some real concerns with her husband and to make an ultimatum in regard to what she considers to be bad decision-making/behaviors on his part. Amanda reported a change in terms of how she is seeing herself and others and is determined to make some good life changes related to personal health.

This was not a counseling session. Recommendations were made about the potential to seek professional support if needed. The pastor of the church had recommended that Amanda utilize a journal to help herself to understand what is happening in her life and to give her an outlet to process some of life’s difficulties.

Figure 4.13 Week #4, “Discovering God, Discovering Yourself” Group

The following (Fig. 4.14) describes the content and discussion of Week #5

**Week #5 True Self vs. False Self**

Jesus' call to each person:

1. Be aware of his presence
2. Turn toward him
3. Submit (surrender) to his love <sup>13</sup>

Ezekiel 36:22-32

Therefore say to the Israelites, "This is what the Sovereign LORD says: It is not for your sake, people of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Sovereign LORD, when I am proved holy through you before their eyes.

For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God. I will save you from all your uncleanness. I will call for the grain and make it plentiful and will not bring famine upon you. I will increase the fruit of the trees and the crops of the field, so that you will no longer suffer disgrace among the nations because of famine. Then you will remember your evil ways and wicked deeds, and you will loathe yourselves for your sins and detestable practices. I want you to know that I am not doing this for your sake, declares the Sovereign LORD. Be ashamed and disgraced for your conduct, people of Israel.

Are you wearing a mask? And when and where do you wear it?

What is this passage saying about God? What are your thoughts?

- The group was led to think through a passage that many were not used to reading. Connections were made with the Prodigal God story. Why was God doing these things? God was doing them for his reputation and for the well-being of God's people. Also, who was responsible for placing the "new heart" and "new spirit?" That was God's responsibility, but there was also a responsibility of the people to allow that to happen.
- Turning a heart of stone (unyielding and firm...protected but not functional) to a heart of flesh (one that can be directed and loved and changed—it is vulnerable)...not the same as a "cold-hearted" person, but one who is protecting herself from hurt.

Figure 4.14. Week #5, "Discovering God, Discovering Yourself" Group

<sup>13</sup> Summarized from *Surrender to Love*, Benner, 71-87.

- This is not the same as “self-betterment” or “self-actualization”...it is about becoming more and more like Christ as we bring more and more of ourselves to God. We are not trying to make ourselves “look better” to God—or to ourselves.

When you are sick and go to your doctor, what do you share with her or with him?

Discussion:

- Lori: “I share everything”
- Amanda: “I keep things from her. There are things I don’t want her to know”
- Andrea: “I share everything”
- We can only change when we accept ourselves as we are.
- We can only meet with God if we meet with him where we are...“Yahweh”—I AM. This was difficult for the group to grasp. Each felt, to some degree, that they needed to “look good” in order to come to God.
- Turning away from a “false self” to a “true self” (Saul as false self)
- “Daring to accept myself and receive love for who I am in my nakedness and vulnerability is the indispensable precondition for genuine transformation. But make no mistake about just how difficult this is. Everything within me wants to show my best ‘pretend self’ to both others and God. This is my false self—the self of my own making. This self can never be transformed, because it is never willing to receive love in vulnerability.”<sup>14</sup>

Done as Homework

Luke 14:15-24...The Banquet

When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, “Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.”

Jesus replied: “A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’

“But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, ‘I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.’

“Another said, ‘I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.’

“Still another said, ‘I just got married, so I can’t come.’

“The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.’

“‘Sir,’ the servant said, ‘what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.’

“Then the master told his servant, ‘Go out to the roads and country lanes and

Figure 4.14, Week #5, “Discovering God, Discovering Yourself” Group

<sup>14</sup> Benner, *Surrender to Love*, 77.



compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. <sup>24</sup> I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.”

- Think about the banquet as a process of inner transformation. Think of Christ as presiding over a banquet at the deep center of our being...his invitation to us is to search out the poor, crippled, blind and lame aspects of our inner self and bring them to his feast of love. Here he stands ready to embrace them with love and welcome them into the family of self that he is slowly weaving together in the ongoing transformation of our life.<sup>15</sup>
- We can only truly come to God as the person that we are. The group talked a lot about this. Several in the group were saying that there were parts of themselves that they felt embarrassed about or disliked or that represented failures. “They would just ruin the party!” said Lori, laughing. Each was encouraged to pray and see where God led them and to think of it as an invitation from God, not an obligation. If God did not lead that way, that was fine as well.

Figure 4.14. Week #5, “Discovering God, Discovering Yourself” Group

The following (Fig. 4.15) describes the content of week #6.

#### **Week #6 “You as the Prodigal Father!” <sup>16</sup>**

Follow up to prior week

- Lori indicated that she had prayed with Luke 14:15-24 all week and visualized Jesus inviting her to bring those parts of herself that she wished to have stay hidden. “It was really hard. I kept telling God that I couldn’t do this, that he didn’t really want THOSE parts of me at his banquet. He kept reassuring me that he did. And you know? He actually did!” Lori reports that she did not feel compelled to do this but felt God beckoning her to bring all of her life to him in prayer. She reports that this was a new experience for her. This was the first time that she came to God and didn’t think about “looking good” to do it.
- The group spent some time discussing her experience. What was that like for you? Was it hard? In what ways did you feel that God was with you? “I just couldn’t get to that,” stated Amanda. She was reassured that it was fine. The important thing was to listen to what God was saying to her. Andrea had not been present so she was filled in on the exercise and encouraged to use it if she felt God leading in that direction.

“Becoming Love” (You as the “Prodigal Father!”)...being able to love God in spite of life situations and others in spite of potential differences to us; love is not simply a “feeling.”

Figure 4.15. Week #6, “Discovering God, Discovering Yourself” Group

<sup>15</sup> Benner, *Surrender to Love*, 82.

<sup>16</sup> Taken in part from Benner, *Surrender to Love*, Chapter 5



"The point of God's love is to remake us in his image of love."<sup>17</sup>

Traditionally there are three stages in spiritual growth and initiated in "crisis." Crisis is not always a bad thing; sometimes it is a good thing that provides opportunity. It always leads toward a potential of decision and change.

1. Purgation—awakening, encounter with God...leaving everything to follow God...this is like falling in love (crisis of change of life)

Disciples who left Jesus to follow him

Jesus Calls His First Disciples (Matthew 4:18-22)

We cannot remain here and show others "mature love"

2. Illumination—things feel like they are "falling apart." "Warm fuzzies" aren't there...(crisis of change in relationship)

Movement from loving God for my sake to loving him for his sake...not just for the benefits that we can get from loving God (Scripture) John 6:25-26

When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, "Rabbi, when did you get here?"

Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval."

- Seeing God as God is, not as I desire God to be (eliminating idols)

Discussion:

- In response to some conversation around desiring God to be as we wish him to be, the leader had discussed a time of prayer and fasting that she had for a friend who eventually died of cancer. "I was angry because I thought that, like the older son, I had done all the right things and should be rewarded. Instead, I wanted to have God as my private vending machine. God cannot operate that way." Many in the group felt that they had done the same thing at different times in their lives and stated that, even now, they want to "do things" that would cause God to fix whatever is going on.

All three women indicated that there were times when they have tried to "bargain" with God to get what they wanted out of a situation. "It didn't really work," stated Lori, "but it feels like a good thing to do!" Illumination means moving beyond what

Figure 4.15. Week #6, "Discovering God, Discovering Yourself" Group

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<sup>17</sup> Benner, *Surrender to Love*, 89.

God can give to being aware of the relationship that exists there.

Mark 14:66-72

Peter—denying Jesus and being presented the opportunity to see himself as he truly was and realize that he is still loved. A deeper, humbler sort of love...

Discussion:

- The group spoke a lot about how Jesus had interacted with Peter after he had denied him and of the opportunity that Jesus gave Peter to move toward restoration with Jesus. He was now restored with humbleness that did not exist prior.
- 3. Union—realizing that we are “one with God” in the Spirit in spite of situations in our lives (crisis—leaving the need for choosing life’s “terrain” and being aware of God’s journeying in every kind of “terrain”)

The disciples at Pentecost—even though Jesus had left them physically they are not alone because God’s Spirit forever minds the believer with God.

Acts 2 (especially 2:1-4)

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

- Union with God does not equal “fusion” with God—it means becoming more and more aware of journeying with Jesus through any terrain we may encounter.
- “The mark of that Christian work of transformation is his love—love that reaches out through him and touches everyone he meets and the many people he spends his days supporting in intercessory prayer.”<sup>18</sup>
- “Real change is possible. We do not need to be the victims of either our personality or our past.”<sup>19</sup>

Discussion:

- Lori stated, “I think I understand this. Regardless of what might be happening in my life, whether it’s good or bad, God doesn’t change. I can look to him in the middle of the hard things. Those things will always change, won’t they?”

Figure 4.15. Week #6, “Discovering God, Discovering Yourself” Group

### Pre and Post Assessment Data

The group that remained for all six weeks was comprised of individuals aged 41-49. Each, according to the pastor’s report, was a new member (or recently re-involved) in First Baptist Church, Exeter. The one who did not continue on in the group was from

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<sup>18</sup> Benner, *Surrender to Love*, 102.

<sup>19</sup> Benner, *Surrender to Love*, 102.

the older age category and a church member of many years. While no control was given for any confounding variables within this study, the group seemed to draw greater appeal for those who were either fairly new to the faith or who had renewed their involvement, which seems reflective of the current state of the church, overall. This study cannot determine whether or not other concerns for attendance may have been important. For example, the group's content may not have been a greater importance for women in the age group of 41-49. Such information may have appealed to women in other age groups but concerns such as the time of day or date that it was meeting may have precluded some from attendance.<sup>20</sup>

#### Faith Background and Service Attendance Patterns

The group's demographics are similar to research conducted that indicates that members within American Baptist Churches are mixed in terms of whether they see themselves as evangelical Christians or mainline Christians.<sup>21</sup> The group represented is strongly Protestant and does not reflect any connection to other faith backgrounds. Information related to these demographics can be seen in Fig. 4.16, below. The discussion following will be based around the content of this chart.

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<sup>20</sup> Discussed in Outcomes, Chapter 5.

<sup>21</sup> The Association of Religion Data Archives, <http://www.thearda.com> (accessed December 27, 2011).

#### Faith Background and Service Attendance Patterns, Pre and Post Assessment

Faith Background Information	Pre-assessment Responses	Post-assessment Responses
I would consider myself an evangelical Christian  (*woman who attended once)	Yes* Not sure Not sure No	No No Not sure
I would consider myself part of a mainline Christian church	Yes* Yes Yes Not sure	Yes Yes Not sure
I would consider myself to be a Roman Catholic Christian	No* No No No	No No No
I would consider myself to be of another faith background	No* No No No	No No No
I attend worship services at least once every three months	Yes * Yes Yes Yes	Yes Yes Yes
I attend worship services almost weekly	Yes* Yes No No	No Yes Yes

Figure 4.16. Faith Background and Service Attendance Patterns, Pre and Post Assessment

All women initially reported attendance of worship services at least once every three months. After the six weeks of the group meeting, the individuals who indicated that they had experienced an abusive relationship indicated that they attended worship services almost weekly. The woman who reported that she had not experienced an abusive relationship reported her frequency of attendance of worship had reduced during the six weeks. (Fig. 4.16)

It is probably impossible to determine based on this data if this correlative change in worship attendance is related at all to attendance within the group. Several factors such as an area illness ("mystery bug at the school," as Andrea stated) and

recent October snowstorm may have changed attendance patterns. The changing patterns of worship attendance may not be directly related to any concepts that were learned as part of the small group participation. Additional follow-up would be needed to see if a change in church worship attendance is related to attendance and involvement in this small group. In some ways this is peripheral to the actual study, but it seems to merit additional review.<sup>22</sup>

#### Attitudes Related to Relationships

Attitudes related to a relationship with God, with oneself and others were considered in both the pre-assessment and post-assessment (Fig. 4.17, below). Comments on any changes contained within these assessments are subjective, since no specific instrument external to the assessment was used to evaluate the attitudes expressed in these responses.

An examination of the responses, however, does seem to show that most of the individuals sensed a change in how they saw themselves and how they experienced God as a result of this group. This was across the board. Especially striking was a comment by one of the women who reported experiencing an abusive relationship in relationship. To the question “who would you say God is to you?” she initially responded, “a higher Being that sits on a throne and I can give all my issues to.” Her response to that question seemed to reflect a God of distance from her to whom she could give concerns but from whom she was not receiving any real relationship. Her post-assessment response to the question (“a friend) seems to suggest a change in perception. Now it seems that she sees God as someone with whom she could interact and receive support and love. This is equally reflected in her response to the question “what names do you use for God?” Her initial response was “God/Jesus/Savior.” After

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<sup>22</sup> See discussion in Outcomes, Chapter 5.

the group experience, she now relates that she uses “Friend, Confidante, Savior.” (Fig. 4.17)

For the three remaining group members there seemed to be an overall increase in the ability to sense God’s presence with them and to know that God did care about their wellbeing. This is seen in pre-assessment and post-assessment responses as well as the discussion generated within the group itself. All the women stated that they have taken something important from the group—more love, feeling of love from God without a sense of judgment by God, a better understanding of love as well as an increased ability to wait for God to speak to person. (Fig. 4.17)

Question	Responses Pre-assessment	Responses Post-assessment
	<p>*Represents the one person who did not complete the follow-up assessment</p> <p>+Represents the individual who reports not experiencing an abusive relationship</p>	+Represents the individual who reports not experiencing an abusive relationship
Who would you say God is to you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Father*</li> <li>• Father +</li> <li>• Savior, friend, inspiration, hope, guide, loving</li> <li>• A higher Being that sits on a throne and I can give all my issues to</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Love +</li> <li>• My Savior</li> <li>• A Friend</li> </ul>
Who would you say you are to God?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Try to be an obedient child*</li> <li>• Child +</li> <li>• Devoted, loving</li> <li>• A lonely being</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lamb +</li> <li>• Someone he is teaching every day, someone who is worthy of his love</li> <li>• A crazy person!</li> </ul>

Figure 4.17. Pre and Post Evaluation of In-Group Surveys

Question	Responses Pre-assessment	Responses Post-assessment
What names do you use for God?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Father*</li> <li>• Heavenly Father and God +</li> <li>• Jehovah</li> <li>• God/Jesus/Savior</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Heavenly Father +</li> <li>• Comforter, Holy Spirit, Father, Jehovah, Jesus</li> <li>• Friend, confidante, savior</li> </ul>
If someone said you were to be obedient to God, what would that mean?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Follow the instructions given in the bible*</li> <li>• Following love and peace in all things +</li> <li>• To serve, to follow the path he leads us on</li> <li>• Follow his rules and behave as he would want me to</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open my heart and mind and follow love +</li> <li>• Listening to what he says through scripture and his word</li> <li>• To listen and understand</li> </ul>
Has anyone ever told you that you should be obedient or be submissive to another person?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes*</li> <li>• Yes +</li> <li>• No</li> <li>• Obedient, not submissive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes +</li> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• Yes</li> </ul>

Figure 4.17. Pre and Post Evaluation of In-Group Surveys

Question	Responses Pre-assessment	Responses Post-assessment
If yes, to whom were you/are you to be obedient or submissive?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We were supposed to be submissive to our husbands according to the Bible*</li> <li>• No +</li> <li>• Mother</li> <li>• Obedient to parents/grandparents/teachers. Never submissive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My earthly father +</li> <li>• Mother and not all the time</li> <li>• Obey my mother</li> </ul>
What does it mean to trust others or God?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I would trust a believer*</li> <li>• Showing and feeling confidence in all actions. Knowing the truth +</li> <li>• Be able to lay everything out in the open, not be judged but be accepted for who we are</li> <li>• To know that they will be true to me and have my back.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• With God, trusting others happens +</li> <li>• To have someone I can tell anything and everything to without consequences or there being a "but"</li> <li>• To believe that he has my best interests and life in his hands</li> </ul>
Are there ways that you hear God speaking in your life?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I try to listen to the Holy Spirit*</li> <li>• Yes. When there is clarity of mind and when my heart is filled with joy and love and forgiveness +</li> <li>• Yes. Through prayer, in the way things turn out, I always know if things will be okay and get a presence almost</li> <li>• He ensures I have what I need when it seems I need it most</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes. In all things great and small +</li> <li>• Yes. I get a feeling he is near. Through prayer and things that happen</li> <li>• Through this group, music, scripture</li> </ul>

Figure 4.17. Pre and Post Evaluation of In-Group Surveys



Question	Responses Pre-assessment	Responses Post-assessment
What is one thing that you would like to take (pre-assessment) have taken (post-assessment) from this spiritual formation group?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (No answer given) 1*</li> <li>• Fellowship +</li> <li>• Definitions of boundaries of obedience and when it good too far the other way</li> <li>• Information about my relationship with God and what I may be missing as a person</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More love +</li> <li>• That it is okay to totally trust in God and that he doesn't judge us</li> <li>• A better understanding of God's, Jesus' love for me and how to listen better. Take time to wait for his words.</li> </ul>
I have lived through an abusive relationship	No * No Yes Yes	No Yes Yes

Figure 4.17. Pre and Post Evaluation of In-Group Surveys

#### Additional Pre and Post Assessment Questions

During the pre-assessment some questions related to feelings of well-being related to church worship were asked (figure 4.18). To the question, "my church experience is meaningful to me," all four of the initial group members indicated "yes." To the question "as a woman, I feel encouraged by the service content," all four also indicated "yes." To the questions, "I feel like I am an important part of my church," three stated "yes," and one indicated that she is "not sure."

My church experience is meaningful to me	Yes Yes Yes Yes
I feel like I am an important part of my church	Yes Yes Yes Not sure
As a woman, I feel encouraged by the service content	Yes* Yes Yes Yes

Figure 4.18. Additional Pre-Assessment Questions

During the post-assessment, some additional questions were assessed related to submission language and worship. The women were asked whether or not they heard or sang about concepts related to submission or obedience in church services. Two of the women reported that they did hear or sing about such concepts. One of the respondents who stated that she did hear about these concepts what self-identified as having lived through an abusive relationship. The other did not report any such abusive relationship in her history. All three indicated that the language contained within church services is appropriate to them.

This seems to suggest that, at least for this group, having the status of “abuse survivor” does not cause women to be more sensitive to the language of submission than it does for those who have not been abused.

#### Additional Post-assessment Questions

I hear/sing about concepts related to submission or obedience in church services	Yes—2 response No—1 response
This language is appropriate to me	Yes—3 responses

Figure 4.19. Additional Post-Assessment Questions

#### Evaluation of Perception of Submission Language

Two weeks after the ending of the group, the three remaining group members were invited to take part in an online follow-up assessment of attitudes related to submission. The survey was completed on “SurveyMonkey.”<sup>23</sup> The survey sought to evaluate whether or not, prior to the six-week group, attitudes related to submission differed depending upon each woman’s self-identified status as “survivor of abuse” or “never having experienced abuse.” The survey also sought to evaluate whether or not, after the six-week group, attitudes related to submission had changed and if the changes

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<sup>23</sup> See Appendix 3.

were correlated to the woman's self-identified status as "survivor of abuse" or "never having experienced abuse." (See figure 4.20, below)

Survey Monkey Individual Attitudes Related to the Word, "Submission," Prior to the Six-week Group

Question	Number of Women
I never really thought about it	All three individuals (self-identified as abused and never having been abused)
It was misused in an abusive relationship	None
It was used in a healthy relationship	None
It was a focus of my spiritual life	None

Figure 4.20 Survey Monkey Individual Attitudes Related to the Word, "Submission" Prior to the Group

Of the possible responses to the attitudes related to submission prior to starting the group (see possible responses in figure 4.20), all three women selected "I never really thought about it" as their response to the question. This was selected regardless of the woman's self-identified status as "having been abused" or "never having experienced abuse." None of the group members, regardless of self-identified status, selected that "submission" had been either misused in an abusive relationship, or had been used in a healthy relationship. None reported that submission had been a focus of her spiritual life.

Of the possible responses to attitudes related to submission after finishing the six week group (see possible responses in figure 4.20), there were some changes in attitude that, for this group, seem related to each woman's self-identified status as "survivor of abuse" or "never experienced abuse." The responses to the questions are recorded in figure 4.21, below.

### Survey Monkey Individual Attitudes Related to the Word, "Submission," after the Six-week Group

Question	Number of Women
My attitude has changed	2 women (self-identified as abused
My attitude has not changed	1 woman (self-identified as not having experienced abuse
I never really think about it (submission)	1 woman (self-identified as abused
It has positive meanings for me	1 woman (self-identified as abused
It is part of my religious practice	1 woman (self-identified as abused

Figure 4.21 Survey Monkey Individual Attitudes Related to the Word, "Submission" After the Group

In the question related to attitudes after the six week group, two of the women reported that her attitude had changed regarding submission. These two women were those who self-identified as "having been abused." The woman who self-identified as "never having been abused" reported that her attitude related to submission had not changed as a result of this group.

Further, one woman (self-identified as a "survivor of abuse") who reported that "I never really thought about submission" prior to the group now considers the concept to "have positive meanings for me." Another woman (also self-identified as a "survivor of abuse") who also reported that "I never really thought about submission" prior to the group now considers the concept to be "part of my religious practice."

#### Evaluation of findings

### Discussion of Results

This is a very small sample of individuals (n=4 at start of group; n=3 at ended of group) that gathered from the congregation of First Baptist Church in Exeter NH. The

original group was comprised of two individuals who reported that they have not suffered an abusive relationship. Two in the group reported that they had lived through an abusive relationship. The group at the end of the six weeks was composed of 2 women who had been abused and one woman who had not been abused.

The data in Figure 4.20 show that women in this group did not think about the concept “submission” prior to beginning this group. This was consistent for both women who reported having been abused and those who had reported that they had not been abused. Therefore the results of the study with this group of women in a mainline church do not support the hypothesis of this study that Christian women who have been abused enter into worship services with different attitudes around submission than do those individuals who have not been abused.

Since the women who completed this group self-identified primarily as seeming themselves as part of a revisionist-like church (mainline church), the data may support the assertion that women in revisionist churches do not necessarily hear language related to submission in their places of worship. This may help to explain why these women may have entered this group having had no real thoughts related to the language of submission.

The data in Figure 4.21 seem to indicate that it was women in the group who report a history of abuse who had attitudinal changes occur around the concept of submission. One woman who self-identified as having been abused stated that submission now “has positive meaning for me.” Another woman who also self-identified as having been abused indicated that submission “is now part of my faith practice.” The individual who had reported no history of abuse reported that submission is still something that she does not think about.

The data do seem to support a correlation in this group of the benefit of exposure to concepts of submission and attitudes of well-being for those who have endured an abusive relationship. The study would seem to show that these changes in attitude are important for abuse survivors. The study does not seem to show the same correlation of well-being and submission for the woman in this group who has not been abused.

The efficacy of this form of group for abused individuals could be assessed more fully by the use of objective instruments designed to assess attitudinal changes. However, while these results are primarily assessed objectively at this point, the study and the group itself may point toward a perception of healing and salvific focus of abuse for those who have been abused that may not be as pertinent to those who have not been abused. It is possible that women who have survived abuse see the concept of submission to Christ as healing and even salvific to them. It would seem from the overall research that these women see God as someone greater than their abuser. While abuse may have been at the core of "submission" to their abuser, love is at the core of submission to God.

This is a small group. However, it represents approximately 11% of the women who attend worship services at First Baptist Church in Exeter on a regular basis. Because of this, it seems plausible that the findings could be extended to the women in the church overall. Because the study made no attempt to control for confounding variables to the research, the generalization of this study cannot be completely assessed at this time. Additional research or groups may help to verify some of the data generated within this study.

The group members do originate from different faith backgrounds. Because of that it might be possible to apply some of these results to the larger Protestant Church. However, it is not completely possible to do so with the information that has been

gathered. While they come from different backgrounds, attitudes related to these concepts seem to differ for individuals who would see themselves as part of a reductionist-type church (identified in the surveys as “evangelical”), rather than as part of a revisionist-type church (identified in the surveys as “mainline”).

This study does show that a group teaching attitudes of submission to abused individuals may be beneficial to their spiritual wellbeing and potential knowledge of God. This is the case due to the fact that all individuals in this group who have suffered through an abusive relationship now speak of submission to God as something that is, at least, beneficial to their Christian beliefs.

Further research and application will need to occur to see if similar content could be applied to other church groups or even to other women within this church. The significance of correlation within this study, however, does point optimistically toward change that occurs when submission to God is made a key part of an abuse survivor's Christian life.

## CHAPTER 5

### OUTCOMES

And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

—Luke 5:31

#### **Introduction**

One's spiritual formation is an important thing. Those who have suffered abuse (and honestly, the world can offer its own abuse to all) may have places where they were expected to fit into a mold of faith that is not quite adequate to their growth or even reflective of God's true character. The considerations in this chapter apply, first of all, to the community at First Baptist Church in Exeter, NH. The considerations also look further into potentials and what are perceived needs for both reductionist and revisionist churches around the area of submission as well as the proper inclusion of these topics in the counseling room. Identified topics are fellowship with others, the need for prioritization of time (including Sabbath), and understanding areas such of boundaries and forgiveness, and the redemption of the language of submission by restoring it to its proper place within a Christian's walk of faith.

#### **Fellowship with Others**

First of all, it needs to be said that it has been a joy to meet with these women. Each came to the group as a new member within the fellowship of First Baptist Church, Exeter, and within a growth period in the life of this church. For this group, the desire for growth has already existed. Perhaps it has been further kindled by interacting around topics of submission and God's love for each of them. Most involved in this group indicated a desire to have fellowship with other women, to know more about who they



are as women and to know more about who God is and what that relationship is like.

These desires and the outcomes gained by these women hopefully point toward a future process and focus that might assist other women in their spiritual formation.

This group has brought together several women who were acquainted with each other through their church. These women traveled with each other through some difficult places spiritually and emotionally and needed a place that was a harbor of sorts—a place of safety to be able to share with each other what is on their minds, what they believe God to be speaking to them and to have others with them who understand their travails. That was true whether or not each woman had stated that she had experienced abuse.

In some ways, thinking ahead to what could happen in regard to this is already in the works. The group has desired to continue on together and will think about the inclusion of other women to journey along with them. All the members felt that six weeks for a group went by very quickly. For example, Amanda stated in an email, “I am going to miss Tuesday nights. As we said, it went by way too fast. I learned a lot and I know I have a lot more to learn... I feel truly blessed to have been a part of the group. Even when it was just the two of us, he was there and knew what I needed that week.”<sup>1</sup>

This group, from its beginning, desired to join together; in fact, this group desired to make the time celebratory and to share in, at least, a snack together during each meeting. In a recent email to the group from Lori, she wished to extend to all of her “new lady friends” blessings from God. It is simple but not simplistic to state that a time of gathering together with each other in the presence of God is a necessary part of a Christian’s walk and practice. A group that can continue to provide that on an ongoing basis seems to be an important outcome of this study. That, in itself, has merit.

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<sup>1</sup> Email message from “Amanda” to author, November 2011.

Perhaps Amanda's thoughts and the women's desires to continue to be together reflect the need for something that is missing in the North American culture. It is interesting that in this age of social media we are not always emotionally connected to each other. During a recent visit to a coffee shop in the area, it was noticed that a very long line of people was waiting to get beverages. Equally as noticeable was the fact that no one in that line was actually talking with anyone else in the line. Instead, each was busily checking out his or her smart phone. It was a fascinating, and in some ways, sad documentary to North American connectivity, or at least North Shore of Boston connectivity! Technology and the like are not necessarily bad in themselves. What is bad is when those things take the place of the intimacy that human beings need to have with each other and with God.

For this group, intimacy with each other helped to direct them toward intimacy with God. Being able to share their journey of faith with others was a key part of their beginning to grow from people who saw God, as one stated as "a higher being that sits on a throne and I can give all my issues to," to "a friend." This is an important shift. As mentioned in previous chapters, it is easy to think that one knows how to "appease" a "higher being." Being vulnerable in an interactive relationship with God where God is not "It" but "Thou" is something quite different.

Intimacy can be scary. Contrary to a relationship based in doing "right things," real intimacy cannot be controlled. In considering one's relationship with God, it might seem for people who have been abused (and even for those who have not been abused) that if one does the right things in life, then God will, by necessity, need to give what a person desires. As stated in other sections, this is often representative of the control frequently deemed necessary for an abused person in an abusive relationship. Lori began to understand that God does not operate within those parameters. She

began to know that doing the right things did not necessarily guarantee her a perfect life. Trust in God, as she had stated, now means to her that while other life circumstances may change, God never will. There was a sense of reverence in the acknowledgement that she is beloved by God but cannot control God. This group certainly seemed to help her in this awareness.

In thinking a bit more globally about this, it seems that the needs in this small group point toward needs that are present within the larger church overall. True spiritual havens of interactions with others are necessary for spiritual growth, whether the people in the group identify themselves as abused or not. These havens ought to be separate from service groups within a church; they should be built around the need that each believer has to be vulnerable before God, others and herself. When abuse has been involved, it seems even more important to have such a group available. Spiritual direction or formation groups that address issues of the spirit are necessary for growth. This does not necessarily translate to more programming or even more potential for numerical growth within a church's structure; rather, it seems to relate to a place where a person can just "be" in her relationship with others and God.

When considering Jesus' interactions with his disciples, his model for those who serve as spiritual guides seems to translate to a focus on the growth that occurs within individuals and within groups of believers. It is the responsibility of leaders to "grow up" the Beloved of God. Perhaps it is time to shift from a focus on mega-churches and focus on intimacy in relationship—both with each other and with God? It seems time to shift to awareness of silence and reflection and the need to hear God's voice.

### **Space to Hear God's Voice**

And, in keeping with the above, it will be good for the women in this group and for Christians overall to think about the unique ways that God speaks to each believer. This

helps believers to understand a bit more of God's character and the unique way that God has created each person and wishes to interact with each person. Amanda's knowledge of God through the beauty of a deer that she might have overlooked on the side of the road indicates one way that God speaks to her. It is important to think through the unique way that each person was made in God's image and how God can best speak to individuals.

Since it takes time and a sense of quiet to determine how God speaks to an individual, this leads to learning how to balance time, requirements and expectations of others with time to spend with God. For many, feeling guilty around taking time for a relationship with God is a significant issue. For subsequent gatherings of this group, and for the larger church overall, understanding what "Sabbath" means and what God desires from Christians is important. It is interesting to note that one of the women indicated that she took from this group the ability to "listen better" to God's love for her and that she can now "take time to wait for his words." Building on this is important for this group. It is also important for the church overall.

Sabbath is, of course, a place of rest. Sabbath can also, as stated previously, be seen a place of submission that leads a person toward the awareness that God is the ultimate authority in all things. This submission to a day of rest seems to be a challenge for the North American church. Church activities, responsibilities and, even, church services, should be places where one is aware of her relationship to Christ. They ought not to remove her from being centered in Christ. Church programming may be very important for a successful church. The end result of any programming, at least according to this small group of women in this study, should be that their relationship with Christ and each other grows. Out of that comes a place where the desire to be present with God grows and flourishes.

Sabbath and the need to slow down is hard to set as priority. "The Sabbath is a day to cease striving. We no longer have to scramble after security by trying to be strong, to have all the answers or quick solutions, to be in charge of our time and schedules, to possess controlling authority, or to find easy gratifications. What a relief it is not to have to try to be God, nor to create our future, nor to establish our security!"<sup>2</sup>

### **Boundaries**

Thinking about Sabbath leads to another word that focuses on the interactions between people: that of "boundaries." Boundaries are an equally important part of the journey from being a person who identifies herself as an abused woman to becoming a person who has survived and is now thriving on the other end of abuse. Some questions such as "Just what does it mean to tell someone 'no'? Is it appropriate to do that?" are necessary things to consider in order to change some of the patterns that seem empowering but are, in reality, imprisoning. When does a woman who has been abused (or not been abused, for that matter) state "yes" to some request? These are important considerations for both survivors of abuse and those who do not indicate any history of abuse. It is okay to set limits around one's life and around a person's time. No time for prayer leads to busyness without focus.

Boundaries of course, are something that could be learned by all groups of people, especially, the church. It is okay to say "no" when "no" is the appropriate response. Lori, for example, was learning to say "no" and "yes" appropriately in the interactions with her former husband. It must be said that "dealing guilt" in order to get work done in the church is inappropriate. Strong-arming a person is not the same as helping her to know her gifts and how God may wish her to use them. It is mandatory for spiritual leaders to be aware of these things. The need to accomplish tasks in a church

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<sup>2</sup> Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, 31.

should never occur on the basis of a “guilted” person. Jesus spent time alone to think, ponder and prayer. Christians, too, must have time for that. There should be no “hamster wheel” living in a relationship with Christ!

The discussion is back again, it would seem, to the need for havens of simplicity and quiet within the life of the church. The work ethic of Protestant Evangelicals is very well known. It is a necessary and good thing to work. It is necessary and a good thing to share the good news with others. Some frequently look at this in light of the “Puritan work ethic” and state that work is the important thing. For such reductionistic groups, it would be helpful to return back to some of the actual thoughts that Puritans had in regard to “wasting time” before God.

In terms of many mainline churches, the need for justice is central to the message. This message is at the very core of changes that have occurred within liturgy and hymns within many of these churches. This message is extended in the desire to allow all people to take part in worship. That message is at the center of interactions that would cause others to be aware of empathy for others. It is also central to being aware of the world’s resources and appropriate and ethical uses of these things. The work around all of this is ever increasing, it would seem. But to put the work in these areas before one’s relationship with Christ is self-defeating at best. Time to be reflective, sense God’s direction in a person’s life, and knowledge of the gospel in regard to that person and not her work is absolutely necessary in the life of a believer. God desires to be first before all causes upon which we may embark in Christ’s name, even in terms of our inclusiveness in human interactions.

### **Who Am I As a Woman?**

Another important area for this group was around the awareness of God's perception of her as a woman. That is regardless of whether that person describes her background as having been abusive or whether it was not abusive. Oftentimes messages gathered from others around a female image become warped by expectations that this North American culture may proffer to women. One of the important things that has changed for many in this group in Exeter is around the question, "How does God see me?" Initially most seemed to look at their relationship with God as meaning they ought to "try to be an obedient child," or "be devoted or loving" to God. One even looked at herself as a "lonely being" as regards her relationship with God. After journeying together, there seems to be greater awareness of the interactive nature of a relationship with God. "Devoted and loving," for example, became "I am someone he is teaching every day, someone who is worthy of his love." This woman saw herself as someone who is able to enter into a place of growth and one for whom God extends celebration around her desires to embark on that growth. The changes in her perception ought to be celebrated.

The church overall needs to take into consideration the fact that "godly self-respect" is frequently missing for individuals who report having survived abuse. This is often due to the hypervigilance that one feels she must utilize in order to be safe in life. In order to move from someone who has survived abuse to someone who thrives on the other side of abuse, a good sense of who she is in light of her relationship with God is necessary.

Patriarchal themes in worship and pedagogy may cause some women to feel alienated or second class within the life of her church. Some, by extension, may feel that God perceives their femininity as second class. It is interesting that this group of women

seemed to have no struggles with male imagery for God. Many of these women seemed to view God as a male figure when we processed through the Lord's Prayer together. To think of God in other terms seemed difficult for them to embrace; in fact, their thoughts of God's strength seemed to be based in God as a masculine being. This may be begging the question to some degree, but it would be important for churches to teach that God is Spirit and neither male nor female. At the base of male imagery for God is the potential toward idolatry that equates human maleness with God's strength. A caveat is necessary here: some churches have sought to remove the "maleness" from Jesus. Jesus was certainly male. It will not help to attempt to adjust history around that reality.

But, it would be helpful to mention that the Word reflects many ways that God has been revealed to humans. This includes the name, "Father." Such a name is important, of course. As previously stated, Jesus frequently referred to God as his Father. It is important, though, to think of any name given to God as something of a metaphor and to draw upon God's desire to relate to humans in a way other than "function," or "the being who rules from on high." For those who have experienced abuse, "Father" may be a difficult way to address God. It would help to broaden the awareness of God to also consider some of the other names by which God may be addressed. This is particularly important if, as stated in previous chapters, abuse has been given by way of a paternal figure.

Church leaders should consider with empathy those who share in this faith journey with them. It is important for church leaders to be aware of the pain that may accompany certain names and certain ways of addressing God. Perhaps there are other names (the Bible includes quite a few!) that could also be added to times of worship and teaching that might help to mitigate some of this pain.



Additionally, topics around “sin,” “forgiveness” and the like are difficult for some people. Forgiveness, especially, is hard. Frequently I tell people I meet with, “Forgiveness is not easy. Have you seen how many times scripture tells us we must forgive? If it were easy, it would just be expected and not mentioned at all!” In this small group in Exeter, it became quite apparent that forgiveness is a difficult concept and even more difficult to embrace.

In the counseling office one is often struck by how often abused individuals believe “forgiveness” means to excuse someone’s behavior. It would be helpful for those who shepherd God’s people to think through a few things that abused women (and others) may be wondering in regard to the person who has done something bad to her. “What does it mean that God asks me to forgive?” “Can I forgive my abuser and continue to feel good about myself in the process?” The truth of the matter is that carrying resentment toward someone’s ill treatment of a person does create within her a feeling of power; the desire to mete out justice is a very strong desire. Understanding that part of human nature would be good for people who help abused people to journey through recovery from their abuse. Thinking about such things as “What else could take the place of the feeling, especially since it causes me to remain ‘stuck’ in the process of healing?” can be helpful. Redemption of language related to submission for those who have been abused in a great deal hinges around these questions.

Forgiveness is a necessary element of submission and its importance must be expressed in a healthy way. For too many abused individuals, messages around forgiveness do not take into account that there is often a process that needs to occur. Without a clear understanding of what an abuser has done to a person, true forgiveness cannot happen. Too often there is a sense that the woman is sinning if she has not been able to forgive yet. Forgiveness is hard.

As those who are spiritual leaders for others, it is important to be a model of what it means to be submissive. Leaders must learn to allow God to help them learn to forgive others when they have been hurt. Equally as important is to learn to submit to God and to others when leaders have wronged others. If there is one thing that an abused woman probably wants to hear, it's the words "I am sorry."

### **Redeeming Submission Language in Churches**

After all of this research and thinking ahead to the future, the overarching desire for this work and for the church would be that the word submission would become a positive word within a life of faith. In order for that to happen, it is important for some reductionist churches to move away from relegation of submission to the outskirts of faith, as if submission were some means of assessing the trappings of a good "holy" life, rather than the centrality of a life in Christ.

By focusing on submission solely within the realm of roles in interpersonal relationships, the concept itself is both cheapened and lessened and made to perform something it was not meant to perform. Submission should never be something that should be extended to women as a punitive living arrangement with a man in her life. Yes, healthy relationships appropriately include the facet of submission. This ought not to just be one-sided in terms of female submission to males. Men need to submit to the women in their lives as well.

These means that reductionistic churches ought to move the language of submission back to the One to whom all believers must submit. Christ, as the one who owns everything, is the one to whom all should be given. It will not do to leave submission concretely focused only in the language of male and female interaction.

Submission needs to be moved from "I am a good woman. I submit to my husband," to, "I am a beloved woman. Christ calls me to be obedient to that love overall."

It is necessary that churches and leaders that support the idea of the appropriateness of submission in abusive relationships must see their error and seek forgiveness from those who have been hurt (physically, emotionally and spiritually) by such a stance. It is important to see an end to language that would support the notion that abuse occurs because “you are not submitting to your husband enough.” That kind of language grieves God’s heart, he who sent Jesus to interact with the least, the lost and the last—and abused—of these.

“I am sorry.” What a gift it would be for women who have been abused to hear that not only from their actual abusers but also from the spiritual leaders who may have hurt them. No one is above hurting others. Leaders who have, perhaps inadvertently, used submission language to hurt abused women need to stop, be submissive before God and listen to the Spirit and what he may be saying to them in regard to that. There is no authority that is present in an abusive relationship. There is also no sin that is beyond God’s ability and desire to forgive.

In terms of many revisionist churches, redemption of the language of submission will move lordship language back into its place of centrality, as well. There needs to be an understanding of the depth of meaning, hope, and good news that is contained in God being far greater than any other thing, person, or concern on this planet.

Also as regards revisionist churches, it is necessary that liturgy and hymns and pedagogical foci again place submission to Christ at the center. The attempts to correct bad theology from the past or to attempt to right injustice should be applauded. Patriarchal and militant language as represented by some hymns will not do to reveal Christ to others. God cannot only be understood as “Father,” “Lord” and “King.” Completely eliminating the truth that lies within those words will not do, either. What must change is a way to allow women (and men, of course) to understand that the fact

that "Christ is owner of it all" is salvific and freeing. Rather than eliminating language related to these concepts and embracing a "let's-build-your-self-esteem" model (as important as self-esteem might be), wouldn't it be good to point believers back to some of the all sufficiency of Christ, back to the one who has called them "His Beloved"? This study would seem to show that the women in this group have benefited by just this very focus; in fact, made changes to their lives to incorporate this very truth.

It would be helpful to provide the opportunity in churches to explore these things. Hymns do carry a church's theology. Perhaps it would be beneficial to look at outmoded words and understand what those words may actually mean. If they are abusive, then they ought to be eliminated and replaced with appropriate words that relate to the relationship of human with God.

As with some reductionist churches, some revisionist churches also need to seek the forgiveness of abused individuals within their fellowship. The survivors of abuse in this group in Exeter certainly show the redemptive quality that exists in understanding true submission to God. By eliminating that language, the richness of faith in Christ has frequently been replaced with something far different. "Submission is an important part of my faith walk," as expressed in one of the survey responses, does not mean that she is allowing herself to be a doormat to others. Instead, it seems to mean to her that if Christ is above all, nothing else can or ought to have power above the "One who owns it all."

Thankfully, God understands that humans are sinners. In fact, God expects that people will sin and miss the mark in terms of relationship with others and with God. It is precisely because of that reality that God must be allowed to have the place of authority in believers' lives. Christians need God to be "the One who Owns it All" because

Christians need to be free to be humans and not need to be “gods” in this world. Leaders should be teaching this to believers. Only in that reality are people actually free.

It is necessary for Christians to advance the notion that being abusive is equivalent to breaking the laws that Jesus came to fulfill. “From the viewpoint of the kingdom of the heavens or from God’s perspective, Jesus points out; those who do the commandments and teach them are the greatest among human beings, whereas those who break the least of the genuine commandments of God and teach others to do so are the worst of human beings (Matt. 5:19).”<sup>3</sup>

One way to advance healing around issues of abuse is by making the pulpit a place of liberation for others. Including information related to abuse in sermons and resources is important. At least one desired outcome for this work is for church leaders and others to understand that abuse is a very real concern within the life of the church. That is the case whether or not it seems possible. To that end, the following are some important resources to have on hand when a woman reports abuse:

**National Domestic Violence Hotline**

1-800-799-7233 (1-800-799-SAFE) TTY: 1-800-787-3224

**National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence**

[www.ncdsv.org](http://www.ncdsv.org)

**RAVE Religion and Violence e-learning**

<http://www.theraveproject.org/>

**PASCH (Peace and Safety in the Christian Home)**

<http://www.peaceandsafety.com/>

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<sup>3</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 142.

## **Hagar's Sisters**

<http://www.hagarssisters.org/>

**HAWC (Healing Abuse, Working for Change) 24-Hour Hotline 1-800-547-1649**

[www.hawcdv.org](http://www.hawcdv.org)

## **Conclusion**

This group in Exeter has exhibited the healing that occurs when abuse survivors begin to understand the redemption that is central to submission to Christ. They have shown that submission is too large a topic to be relegated to the outskirts of the faith. Through their lives they have shown that submission cannot be placed merely in interpersonal relationships that reflect only women submitting to men, especially if such relationships are abusive. It is necessary for leaders of Christ's church to stand up against the violence it often allows to masquerade as submission.

This group also strongly lived out the reality that the language of submission ought not to be wiped from church's liturgy, hymns and teaching. Elimination of the language will not serve to eliminate the injustice that has happened in the past. The women in this group who were abused had their lives changed by being embraced by the one whom they could call Lord, the one who they could come to see as owning all of their being. It is an equally great injustice to not allow believers to understand that faith is not faith without the element of submission. To disallow abuse survivors the freedom of being yoked with the one who will always direct in love is an egregious situation that must be remedied. In fact, these survivors have lived out the redemption of this language by the inclusion in their very own lives.

This is a very important thing to keep in mind, especially when considering the abused individuals that this work has meant to address, but also when considering the larger church in which these women are a part. Church, in this respect, applies to all

those who would consider themselves believers of Christ and that can only be focused as those who are able to listen as the Beloved of God, who “were humble and open [can see God]; those who let him be God and did not insist on being God themselves...” and “those who whose need is great, the sinners, the wretched...”<sup>4</sup> “For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light,” says Jesus to his followers.

God desires a believer’s true shalom, the perfect peace that comes only within a submissive relationship with God, based in an attitude of trust. Submission to God allows for God’s dreams, desires and love to work through each believer, whether abused or not. Submission is redeemed by its relocation to the centrality of the Christian life.

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<sup>4</sup> Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, 59.

## APPENDIX 1

### PRE-ASSESSMENT

Spiritual Formation Group Pre/Post Evaluation

First Baptist Church, Exeter

No. \_\_\_\_\_

This pre-evaluation is designed to explore the potential relationship between abuse and concepts related to submission. The information you provide will be helpful for considering ways to effectively speak of these concepts with women who have been abused. This study is being conducted by Bonnie Prizio, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Please be assured that all of your answers will be kept strictly confidential. The information that you provide will be presented only in summary form, in combination with the responses of other participants in this study. The answers that you give will never be linked with your name. By completing this pre-evaluation, you have given your consent that you are a voluntary participant in this study.

1. Who would you say God is to you?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Who would you say that you are to God?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. What names do you use for God?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. If someone said you were to be "obedient" to God, what would that mean?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. Has anyone every told you that you should be obedient or be submissive to another person? If yes, to whom were you to be obedient?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. What does it mean to trust others or God?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. Are there ways that you hear God speaking in your life?



8. What is one thing that you would like to take from this spiritual formation group?

9. My present age is      18-25   26-33   34-40   41-49   50-57   57-65   66-74   75-85   85-99

10. I have lived through an abusive relationship	yes	no	not sure
11. I would consider myself an Evangelical Christian	yes	no	not sure
12. I would consider myself part of a "mainline" Christian Church	yes	no	not sure
13. I would consider myself to be Roman Catholic	yes	no	not sure
14. I would consider myself to be of another faith background	yes	no	not sure
15. I attend worship services at least once every three months	yes	no	not sure
16. I attend worship services almost weekly	yes	no	not sure
17. I hear/sing about concepts related to submission or obedience in church services	yes	no	not sure
18. This language is appropriate	yes	no	not sure

## APPENDIX 2

### POST-ASSESSMENT

Spiritual Formation Group Pre/Post Evaluation

First Baptist Church, Exeter

No. \_\_\_\_\_

This post-evaluation is designed to explore the potential relationship between abuse and concepts related to submission. The information you provide will be helpful for considering ways to effectively speak of these concepts with women who have been abused. This study is being conducted by Bonnie Prizio, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Please be assured that all of your answers will be kept strictly confidential. The information that you provide will be presented only in summary form, in combination with the responses of other participants in this study. The answers that you give will never be linked with your name. By completing this post-evaluation, you have given your consent that you are a voluntary participant in this study. Now that you've completed six weeks of the spiritual formation group:

1. Who would you say God is to you?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Who would you say that you are to God?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. What names do you use for God?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. If someone said you were to be "obedient" to God, what would that mean?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. Has anyone every told you that you should be obedient or be submissive to another person? If yes, to whom were you to be obedient?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. What does it mean to trust others or God?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. Are there ways that you hear God speaking in your life?

8. What is one thing that you have taken from this spiritual formation group?

9. My present age is      18-25   26-33   34-40   41-49   50-57   57-65   66-74   75-85   85-99

10. I have lived through an abusive relationship	yes	no	not sure
11. I would consider myself an Evangelical Christian	yes	no	not sure
12. I would consider myself part of a "mainline" Christian Church	yes	no	not sure
13. I would consider myself to be Roman Catholic	yes	no	not sure
14. I would consider myself to be of another faith background	yes	no	not sure
15. I attend worship services at least once every three months	yes	no	not sure
16. I attend worship services almost weekly	yes	no	not sure
17. I hear/sing about concepts related to submission or obedience in church services	yes	no	not sure
18. This language is appropriate	yes	no	not sure

Thank you for your participation!

### APPENDIX 3

#### SURVEY MONKEY QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES

Survey Monkey Questions and response

Question	Number of Women
I never really thought about it	All three individuals (self-identified as abused and never having been abused)
It was misused in an abusive relationship	None
It was used in a healthy relationship	None
It was a focus of my spiritual life	None

Figure 4.10 SurveyMonkey Attitudes Related to the Word, "Submission" Prior to the Group

## APPENDIX 4

### INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

#### INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Project Title: **My Yoke is Easy and My Burden, Light: Redeeming the Language of Submission in the Spiritual Formation of Women Abuse Survivors**

Principal Investigator: **Bonnie Prizio, Spiritual Formation for Ministry Leaders, Doctor of Ministry Program, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary**

#### PURPOSE

This is a research study. The purpose of this research study is to examine if there is a correlation between thoughts related to the concept of submission and whether or not a person has experienced physical or sexual abuse and if these thoughts change after engagement with a spiritual formation group. These findings will become part of a thesis-project for Doctor of Ministry studies. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether to be in the study or not. You may ask any questions about the research, what you will be asked to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear.

We are inviting you to participate in this research study because you are a woman who has expressed interest in growing in your Christian journey.

#### PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate, your involvement will last for six weekly meetings for one and one-half hours each.

The following procedures are involved in this study.

1. A short pretest will be administered and data gathered (your name will not be included on the document since your privacy is to be respected throughout this process)
2. Six weeks of a spiritual formation group will follow. This will begin on Tuesday, September 13<sup>th</sup> and will run from 7:00-8:30 PM. This will be held at First Baptist Church, Exeter, NH. Some questions to be discussed will be
  - a. Who is God?
  - b. How does God see you?
  - c. By what names has God been revealed?
  - d. Have you been aware of God in your life? In good times? Difficult times?
  - e. What does it mean to be obedient (or to be “submissive”) to God? To others?
  - f. How does God work to transform us?

3. A short posttest will be administered and the group will wrap up by an open discussion of all topics discussed.

### **RISKS**

The possible risks associated with participating in this research project are as follows. For those who have experienced abuse, at times the discussion may bring up difficult memories and emotions. While the person directing this study is a Licensed Mental Health Counselor and is comfortable addressing strong emotions related to memories of abuse, the purpose of the group is to grow spiritually by examining different concepts related to the Christian life. The discussion may turn to the difficulties you have experienced, but this is not a psychotherapeutic group. If triggered emotions seem like something that ought to be addressed in a therapeutic relationship, the leader will help arrange a referral to a mental health professional if the need arises.

### **BENEFITS**

The potential personal benefits that may occur as a result of your participation in this study are a deeper understanding of God's love for you as an individual, a greater understanding of the ways that God has been revealed to humankind, and God's care of survivors of abuse as well as those who may not have experienced abuse. The potential benefits may also involve a great understanding of the concepts of "obedience" and "submission" and the ways that both men and women who are Christians are to submit to each other and to God.

### **COMPENSATION**

You will not be compensated for participating in this research project.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Records of participation in this research project will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. Your pretest and posttest will include an identification number, not your name. The data will be compiled via that identification number. The sole person having access to this data will be the examiner. In the event of any report or publication from this study, your identity will not be disclosed. Results will be reported in a summarized manner in such a way that you cannot be identified.

### **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Taking part in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you agree to participate in this study, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to take part, or if you stop participating at any time, your decision will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you may otherwise be entitled. If you decide to withdraw during this study/group, data collected to that point will be included in the study results.

## **QUESTIONS**

Questions are encouraged. If you have any questions about this research project, please contact: **Bonnie Prizio, 978-578-7401, bprizio@gmail.com**. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, please contact the Chair of the Institutional Review Board at: 978-646-4176.

---

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Participant's Name (printed):

---

---

(Signature of Participant)

---

(Date)

## **RESEARCHER STATEMENT**

I have discussed the above points with the participant. It is my opinion that the participant understands the risks, benefits, and procedures involved with participation in this research study.

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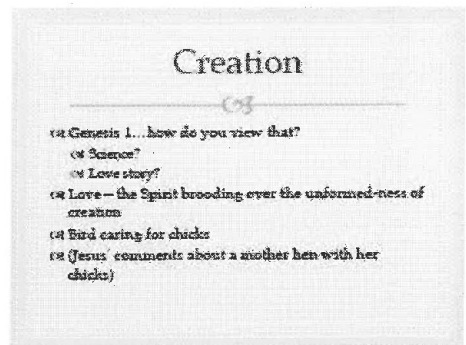
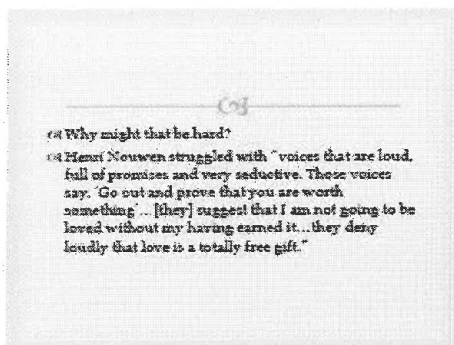
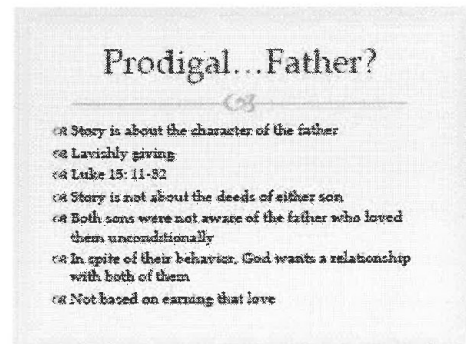
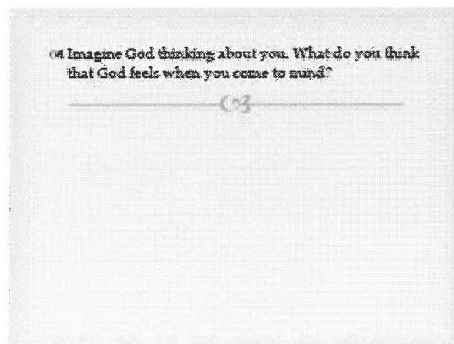
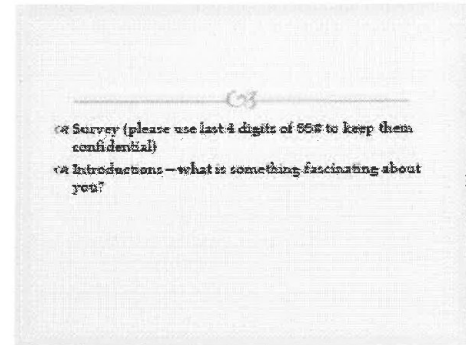
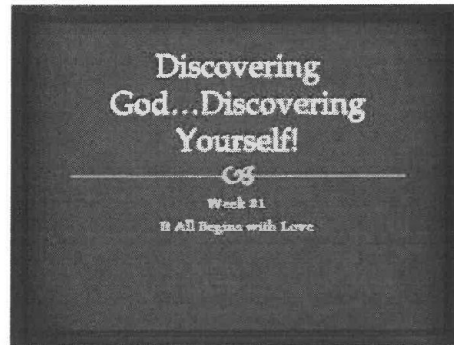
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## APPENDIX 5

### POWERPOINT --DISCOVERING GOD, DISCOVERING YOURSELF





## Love story because...

- 03
- 01 God created us in God's image
- 02 That image is "good!"
- 03 God wants us to be friends with God
- 04 Intimate relationship
- 05 God did not base that love on behavior

## The Story of the Fall

- 03
- 01 It is at the basis of our challenge as humans
- 02 Love on our terms vs. love on God's terms
- 03 Love on our terms... we maintain control
- 04 Love on God's terms... God has control

- 03
- 01 Addictions (example)
- 02 Less-than-true relationship occur
- 03 Living life by projecting an image
- 04 Love as a hamster wheel...

## Genuine Love

- 03
- 01 Jesus point believers toward the character of God
- 02 Genuine love -- is it the same as "inviting Jesus into your heart, joining a church, doing what Jesus commands?"
- 03 Experiencing God's love is genuine love
- 04 Surrendering (submitting) to that love means realizing that God loves us in spite of our behaviors ("good or bad")

- 03
- 01 What are some challenges to that love for you, others?

## Lectio

- 03
- 01 Psalm 131

Lord, my heart is not proud;  
I don't look down on others.  
I don't do great things,  
and I can't do miracles.  
But I am calm and quiet,  
like a baby with its mother.  
I am at peace, like a baby with its mother.

## Love and Fear

- Q Love... what does "perfect love" mean?
- Q Cast out *diablo*... perfected love replaces fear
- Q Parable of lost sheep and coin, Luke 15 "if God catches up with me, he'll be angry"
- Q Does it matter how the sheep got in the situation?
- Q Rejects in return regardless of its straying
- Q God's "economy" is different than ours -- everyone counts!
- Q Amazing grace!
- Q God is not disappointed by our mistakes... God understands you!

## The Lord's Prayer

- Q Matthew 6:9-13
- Q Growing up the Beloved... Submission and Surrender
- Q At the core of the Lord's prayer is a note of submission
- Q Spiritual maturity... God wants us to be his children and yet "grow up"

- Q Our Father in Heaven
- Q What does it mean that Jesus is calling God "Father"
- Q Other names? For example, "El Shaddai"

## Holy

- Q In Heaven your name is "Holy"
- Q What does it mean to be holy?

## Your Kingdom Come...

- Q Subjunctive/indicative nature of this part of prayer

## Give Us Our Bread for Today

- Q Literal? Figurative bread?
- Q What does it mean to ask for bread?

## Forgive Us When We Sin

- 01 "Amarta" Missing the mark
- 02 Not sharing in the prize
- 03 Us as sinners

## Help us to forgive

- 01 Even in abuse, we are to forgive others
- 02 What does it mean to forgive?
- 03 How is submission a part of that
- 04 Are "reconciliation" and "forgiveness" the same thing?

## Lead Us Away from Temptation

- 01 Direct us toward things that are good for us and away from those things that would harm us

- 01 What is the difference between "obey" and "surrender/submission?"
- 02 God wants the submission of our heart, not merely compliance of behavior

## Week #4 True Self vs. False Self

- 01 Jesus' call to each person:
- 02 Be aware of his presence
- 03 Turn toward him
- 04 Submit (surrender) to his love

## Ezekiel 36:22-32

- 01 Are you wearing a mask? And when and where do you wear it?
- 02 What is this passage saying about God? What are your thoughts?

## Homework!

ca Luke 14:15-24

- ca Pretend that Jesus is calling you to the banquet-- all the parts of you that are wounded or that you might not want to have at the banquet
- ca Think of it as an inner transformation... Jesus wants to embrace us all
- ca Inviting us to search out the poor, lame, etc. parts of ourselves..

## You as the Prodigal Father! Week 5

- ca "The point of God's love is to remake us in his image of love."
- ca Purgation-- awakening, encounter with God
- ca (Matt 4:14-22)

- ca Illumination -- things feel like they are falling apart... warm fuzzies aren't there
- ca Moving from loving God for my sake to loving him for his sake... notice his "benefits" alone
- ca John 9:25-26
- ca Seeing God as God is... eliminating idols
- ca Mark 14:66-72

- ca Union -- realizing we are "one with God" in spite of life's difficulties
- ca Acts 2 (especially 2:1-4)

## Wrap-up

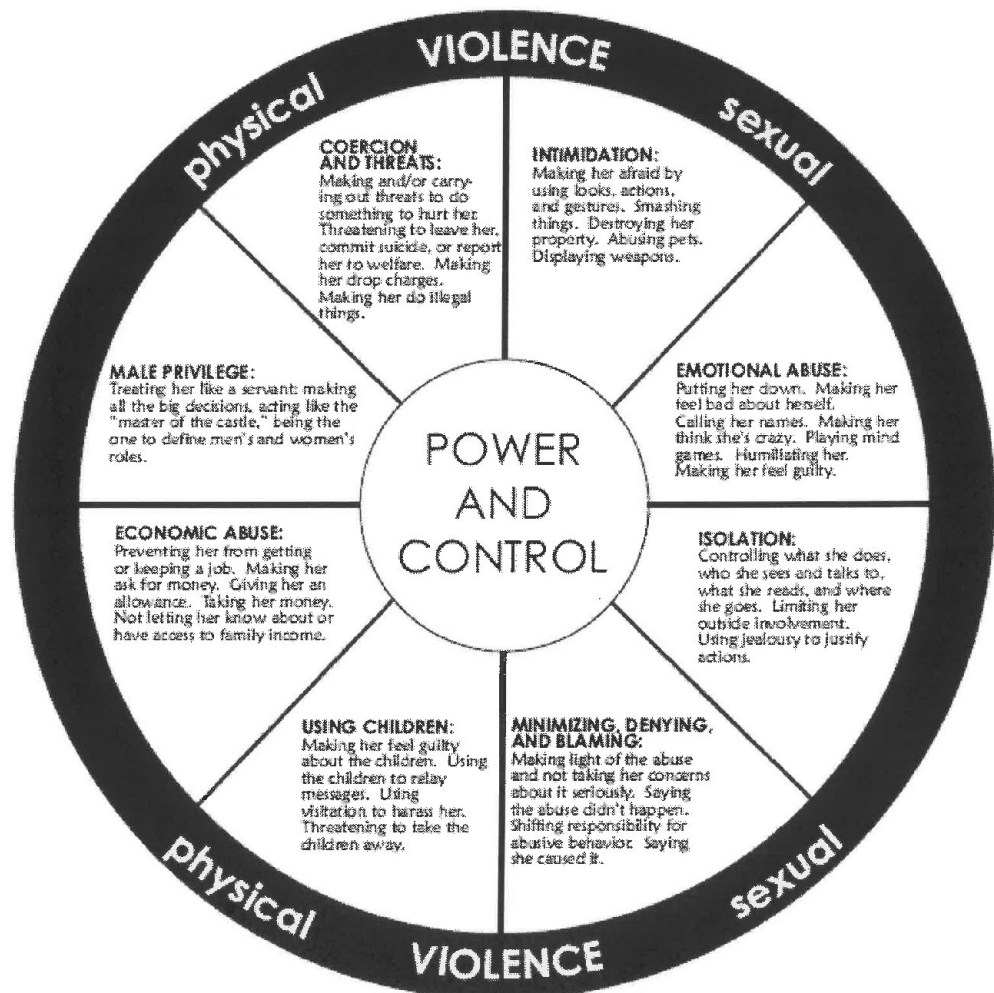
## APPENDIX 6

### POWER AND CONTROL WHEEL

# POWER AND CONTROL WHEEL

Physical and sexual assaults, or threats to commit them, are the most apparent forms of domestic violence and are usually the actions that allow others to become aware of the problem. However, regular use of other abusive behaviors by the batterer, when reinforced by one or more acts of physical violence, make up a larger system of abuse. Although physical assaults may occur only once or occasionally, they instill threat of future violent attacks and allow the abuser to take control of the woman's life and circumstances.

The Power & Control diagram is a particularly helpful tool in understanding the overall pattern of abusive and violent behaviors, which are used by a batterer to establish and maintain control over his partner. Very often, one or more violent incidents are accompanied by an array of these other types of abuse. They are less easily identified, yet firmly establish a pattern of intimidation and control in the relationship.



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